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This dissertation explores the concept of paradise as it is used as a physical space within Middle English literature. In examining the narrative function of this space, the fundamental question that it explores is whether the image carries with it any special weight. In exploring this issue, it considers three texts popular in later medieval England: *Pearl*, *The South English Legendary Saint Brendan's Journey*, and *The Booke of Ghostlye Grace*. Ultimately, it asserts that the inclusion of such an important cultural icon has a profound effect on readers' interpretation of a text. Because this image carries with it such cultural weight, readers cannot help but carry their understanding of its significance to the text. Whether it is represented as a pristine wilderness, a perfect cityscape, or a union with the divine, paradise by its very definition represents humanity's attempt to define perfection. Because that which exists in paradise is by definition perfect itself, the image becomes an important tool for critiquing or affirming cultural values and social practices. In examining these three texts, this dissertation asserts that the image plays an important narrative role in each. Because the perfection of this space is nearly universally accepted, the texts make use of its innate social context. By making paradise the locus of action, these texts are able to justify certain ways of seeing and understanding the world, ultimately promoting certain religious, political, or social ideals.

PLACE, PARADISE, AND PERFECTION: THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF
THREE MIDDLE ENGLISH VERSIONS OF PARADISE

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF SPACE

The question of what awaits humanity after death has always fascinated the human mind. For obvious reasons, the lure of understanding what happens to people when their time in this world is finished has a powerful hold on theologians, philosophers, and lay-folk alike. Of the images devised to represent the possibilities of life beyond this world, paradise is perhaps the most intriguing. Most major monotheistic religions, and many polytheistic ones, have some concept of a paradise that awaits the just in the next world. Notable examples of such systems include the New Jerusalem of Christian thought, the Elysian Fields of Greek myth, and the Norse tradition of Valhalla. Regardless of the individual manifestation, the draw of an otherworldly paradise is an important part of popular religion, and literary records suggest that the question of where humanity goes after death was especially important to the Christian Church of the Middle Ages. Because the Bible offers few images of heaven and hell, those teasing passages it does provide leave much to the imagination, and early theologians developed a variety of responses to the question of what happens to the elect after death. A survey of church writings suggests that the focus of the earliest inquiries into the subject centered on the nature of the body after death. Theologians such as Irenaeus argued in favor of a perfect physical body that would allow the faithful to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh without sin while others, such as Augustine, envisioned heaven as a purely spiritual place wherein

the elect found peace through the experience of God.¹ Eventually, as the Augustinian model established dominance, the discussion shifted to other questions about the afterlife, and during the medieval period, one of the most captivating issues was the question of place. A number of competing ideas developed in response to this question, ultimately leading to the creation of a rich and varied tapestry of descriptions of the heavenly landscape. These expressions influenced the period's literature where we find a complex relationship between the images of paradise and the narratives that include them.

Because the authority of the church is often regarded as monolithic during the medieval period, the range of ideas regarding the nature of paradise might be surprising. Equally unexpected is the frequency with which the period's literature describes the afterlife. Indeed, artistic, literary, and theological representations of heaven and hell were exceedingly popular in the Middle Ages, and the descriptions of physical spaces produced during the period can vary wildly, especially in regards to paradise. Hell, with all of its fascinating torments, seems to have especially captured the popular imagination, and the period's artists and writers produced countless illustrations of hellish vistas. Such works seem to relish the punishments inflicted upon the poor spirits imprisoned there and to contain a certain, if not all encompassing, unity of thinking. Discussion of heaven, on the other hand, seems more confined to the realm of theology, and the period provides fewer artistic representations of paradise. The relative scarcity of descriptions of heaven might be traced to the difficulty of the subject matter, and artists faced with the prospect

¹ In *Heaven: A History*, Lang and McDannell argue that physical representations such as those found in the writings of Irenaeus arose from a desire to reward the saints for the destruction of their physical bodies while spiritual systems suggest an uneasy attitude toward the flesh within the early Christian church (47-68).

of illustrating such spaces most certainly found earthly language poorly equipped to do justice to the supposed perfection of the heavenly landscape. However, this is not to say that literary depictions of paradise do not exist. On the contrary, the art and literature of the period offers exciting glimpses into the medieval concept of heaven, and this dissertation purposes to explore the ways in which three texts of the later Middle Ages describe paradise and the narrative purpose that those images play within those texts.

Although spatial examinations of literary works are a relatively new method of critical investigation, the function of place in literature has become an increasingly important avenue of exploration since the English publication of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* in 1990.² Before the work of such philosophers as Michel Foucault and Lefebvre, discussion of space was primarily a scientific endeavor reserved for mathematicians and architects. However, as scholars began to explore more abstract ideas, the field began to encompass more disparate kinds of study. Lefebvre, in particular, opened up new areas of exploration with his discussion of the social functions of the production and representation of space. He asserts that the social and economic impacts of such representations are essential, and his famous mantra, "social space is a social product," became the foundation for the work of a number of other critics (26). Lefebvre argues that when mankind manipulates physical space, whether by constructing a cathedral, paving a road, or urbanizing a forest, the act carries certain political and social implication, and when artists employ space in an abstract fashion, they tap into a complex series of social values, ideals, and symbols that inhabitants of the society instinctively

² Lefebvre's work was originally published in French in 1974.

recognize (35, 75). This is what Lefebvre terms 'representational space,' and he asserts that it exists alongside physical bodies, making 'symbolic use of its objects' (35).

Perhaps the most cited example of his theory at work is his examination of the art and architecture of Renaissance Tuscany. Lefebvre observes that as the ascendant merchant class began to replace the feudal system that dominated the region, the architecture of the area changed in reaction to this social adjustment. As the peasants gave way to independent farmers who received a share of their work, some of this money was used to develop the rural landscape, and the region became famous for its method of organizing its communities. Among the most notable modification that the Tuscans made to their environment was the arrangement of the farmers' homes in a circle around the mansion of the representative of the controlling merchants. Aspects of these newly crafted physical spaces, such as their long alleys of cypress and their structured patterns of development, began appearing in the work of Tuscan painters, who, Lefebvre argues, used them to represent property, safety, and wealth (78).³ Thus, as the economic needs of Tuscan society changed, its physical space changed with it, a transition that was reflected within the period's art.

Thanks to Lefebvre's pioneering work, critical examinations of 'spaces of representation' within literary works have become more widespread. Rob Shields notes that such studies are valuable for their 'complex re-coded and decoded versions of lived spatialisations' and for their 'criticism of dominant social orders and of the categories of

³ Lefebvre goes on to argue that this spatial change allowed the Italian artists to discover 'perspective' (79). His full discussion goes outside the scope of this paper, for which it is enough to accept that all spaces have social meanings which ultimately play an important role in shaping readers' understanding of the text.

social thought expressed in aesthetic termsö (164). One notable current within spatial criticism is the discussion of the ways in which visual landscapes within literary works are charged with social significance. Such thinking asserts that images used by works of art to represent a physical location resonate with cultural significance. Art scholar David Bernstein explains it thusly: "We are looking at a work of art, but on another level, we are looking at what should be in the world" (n.p.).

The twelfth-century architectural art at the Saint-Foy abbey-church in Conques, France shows how closely connected representations of heavenly images and social issues can be. This abbey sits on what was once a major route for pilgrims journeying to holy spots in Spain and Portugal. The influx of wealth that the abbots received from these travelers allowed them to construct an extraordinary church, and by the twelfth century, it had become an important destination in its own right. Above the entryway of the main building, they constructed an impressive stone carving which depicts the Last Judgment. The bottom left hand corner of this image clearly depicts an urban heaven, with its Romanesque arches and its many strong pillars.⁴ Across from the image of heaven is another representation, this one of hell. This scene, with its chaotic expanses and confused mass of people, stands in stark contrast to the ordered urbanity of heaven. The heavenly side of the carving is a place of peace. The images are symmetrical, and the faces of its subjects are calm. On the other hand, the hellish side disintegrates into disorder as people twist and turn in every direction, blending into a jumble of warped and tortured figures. At the top of the illustration, on Christ's right, those who have been

⁴ For photographs of Conques's portal, see *The Allegory of the Church* by Calvin B. Kendall.

deemed worthy of admission into the heavenly city wait to approach God's throne. While the exact identity of each figure is a matter of debate, it is clear that the most immediate come from the ranks of priests and abbots. As they get farther away from the throne, they decrease in size (and include at least one stooped-over king), perhaps indicating a difference in their standing within the heavenly community or the size of their ultimate reward. The images concern with both the theological issues of heaven and hell and the social issues of rank and hierarchy reveal the close connection between art, space, and meaning.

Although Lefebvre's work is not literary in focus, he does recognize that it applies to such studies, and many critics employ his theories within discussions of literary works. One such critic is Rob Shields, who seems to be most interested with the "image of society as a city" (141). Tracing the work of Marxist critics in addition to Lefebvre, Shields argues that urban areas are the loci of a society's power and that images of urban spaces are abstractions of the values of the represented place (148). Expanding upon Lefebvre's theory, Shields argues that within this model, depictions of rural areas signify modes of thinking that are outside the power of the established social order (148). While such representations are useful in exploring the context of an artist's use of urban and rural images, they do not mandate a value judgment on either space's ideals. For example, during the Victorian period in England, artists often romanticized the countryside as an area outside the corruption of the industrial city. However, just half a century later the work of Patrick Kavanagh, typified by his "The Great Hunger," illustrates a dramatic shift in attitude as he contrasts the ignorance of the farmer with the

sophistication of the urbanite in his assault on rural Irish life. Thus, it is important to note that spatial representations do not necessarily value one image over another; instead, these images allow critics to examine the way in which an individual work taps into the cultural meaning signified by urban and rural spaces.

The discussion of the relationships between space and meaning has been a part of art criticism for much longer than it has been a part of literary criticism; however in the past three decades, scholars have begun to more frequently apply these methods to literature. In one very early exploration of the topic, Ann Bermingham argued that artistic landscapes serve as a discourse through which certain political practices may be legitimized (3). In W.J.T. Mitchell's investigation of the genre of visual landscapes, he agrees that physical representations are often bound with social issues. However, he takes this argument one step farther, explaining that "landscape doesn't merely signify or symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power that is independent of human intentions" (*Landscape* 2). He goes on to say that visual representations of physical spaces are "instruments of social force," asserting the ability of such illustrations to serve an affective purpose (212). While it is easy to dismiss such thinking's applicability to the discussion of literature, Mitchell himself admits that scholars of visual art and literary critics often employ similar techniques, such as in their exploration of the power of images (*The Language* 2). Indeed, he suggests that visual art and poetry have more in common than might first be apparent, for the eye often substitutes for the ear when experiencing a piece of literature (*Iconography* 117). The idea that an artist's choice of physical details represents some conscious decision and is

therefore inexorably tied to the work's meeting has profound ramifications for explorations of the way that texts make use of paradisaic images. Such thinking stresses the importance of the images chosen by poets to represent heaven within their writing, both in terms of their immediate literary meaning as well as their relationship to larger social issues. When a human being encounters an image of a physical space, that image means something. It is by its very nature representative of a way of thinking about and responding to the world and is therefore bound with certain significance based upon the outlooks of a given culture or individual.

With this understanding of the nature and importance space within a piece of literature, here then is an overview of how this dissertation will proceed. In an attempt to show how an artist's choice of paradisaic imagery reflects the social, political, or theological themes of the work, it will examine three Middle English texts from the later medieval period. The first text it will explore is the Middle English *South English Legendary Saint Brendan's Voyage*. This text, placed in the early fourteenth century by most conservative critics, tells the story of Saint Brendan's journeys into the Atlantic Ocean. As part of his adventures, Saint Brendan arrives at the famed Island of Saints, a paradise set aside for the righteous to await the second coming of Christ. Because it eliminates much of the *Vita sancti Brendani's* focus on monasticism, the changes made by the *SEL* to its source suggest a more pressing concern with the issue of pilgrimage, and its image of the *Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum* ultimately justifies this controversial practice. The *Booke of Ghostlye Grace*, a Middle English translation of Mechthild of Hackborn's mystic visions, offers a very different image of paradise than does *Brendan's*

Voyage. In this text, paradise is found within the body of Christ. As Mechtild relates her showings, she depicts herself being drawn into an increasingly intimate relationship with Jesus, and her descriptions of Christ as a physical locale plays an important part in justifying the need for an individual and personal relationship with God. A third Middle English text that makes use of a detailed paradisaal landscape is the alliterative verse poem *Pearl*. This text follows a heart broken man as he explores three distinct spiritual settings. As he seeks to understand the contradictions between earthly and heavenly life, he witnesses the New Jerusalem, an event which serves to justify the hierarchies of both temporal and celestial society. Certainly, these texts do not exhaust the varied ways in which the medieval mind imagined heaven. However, they do illustrate the larger ideas that authors shape their texts through their use of images and that the descriptions of these spaces serve to justify or refute certain social practices important to the text.

CHAPTER II

THE EVOLUTION OF PARADISE

Before examining individual examples of paradisaal representations⁵ in literary texts, some discussion of the history of the concept of paradise may prove useful. In modern popular imagination, two images are most prevalent: the city and the garden. Certainly, these metaphors have garnered the most modern critical attention. These descriptions, which imagine heaven as a new Garden of Eden or a New Jerusalem, have long traditions in Christian theology and provide important insights into Christian history and belief. Indeed, their prevalence makes it easy to fixate on these images to the exclusion of other artistic expressions of heavenly spaces.⁶ However, other systems do exist. Examples of texts that provide alternative metaphors for the afterlife include the pristine wilderness of the Anglo-Saxon *Phoenix*, the spiritual union of Mechthild of Hackeborn's *The Book of Ghostly Grace*, and the earthly paradise of *St. Brendan's Voyage*. Such works illustrate the diversity of paradisaal descriptions that can be found within medieval literature and complement the discussion of more traditional visions of heaven. Indeed, the variety of images at work within the medieval Christian Church might surprise modern readers who have grown accustomed to the descriptions of the

⁵ I would argue that the specific Christian idea of heaven is a type of paradisaal image. Thus, heaven is a paradise.

⁶ For example, one of the most important studies of heaven's spaces is Jeffrey Burton Russell's *A History of Heaven*. Russell's work notes that the sacredness of the space is often expressed through "metaphors of kingdom, garden, city, or celestial spheres," and it focuses primarily on those images (13).

New Jerusalem that are ubiquitous in contemporary depictions of the otherworld.

Certainly, the idea that, while once a variety of expressions existed, one now dominates begs several important questions. One question is that of evolution, for these images did not spring forth over night. Each is drawn from centuries of religious tradition, some of which are outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Another question involves the primacy of the city within modern thought and the social, religious, and political factors that led to its dominance. Certainly, addressing these issues can tell us much about the formation and transmittal of these images and will serve as a foundation for the discussion of their narrative functions that follow.

While the idea of paradise is ubiquitous in early modern and modern cultures, it was not so prevalent in the beliefs of many ancient cultures. In one of the earliest manuscripts, the afterlife offers little comfort. The Sumerian text *The Epic of Gilgamesh* speaks to the apprehension that many early cultures express in their writings about the afterlife. In this epic, which dates to the second century B.C.E., the hero Gilgamesh achieves great fame by placing his life at risk to defeat the giant Humbaba. After being warned by his companion Enkidu that facing this creature may mean his death, Gilgamesh scoffs at such sentiment. Full of youthful bravado, he says: "Where is the man who can clamber to heaven? Only the gods live forever with glorious Shamash, but as for men, our days are numbered ... if I fall, I leave behind me a name that will endure" (*Epic* 17).⁷ Here, Gilgamesh expresses the burning desire for eternal reputation often seen in

⁷ Because this chapter will examine several different cultures of paradise and because it is intended primarily to establish background and context for the larger issues of this paper, I will employ modern English translations in it. In future chapters, wherein the focus will be analytical, I will instead use original languages.

the stories of ancient heroes. However, the hero's bravado quickly fades as he learns just how fleeting life is. When the exploits of Gilgamesh and his companion draw the ire of the gods, the ruler of heaven decides that one of the companions must die, and the lot falls to Enkidu. Through this experience, Enkidu faces his own mortality and offers a glimpse into the Sumerian view of the afterlife:

There is the house whose people sit in darkness; dust is their food and clay their meat. They are clothed like birds with wings for covering, they see no light, they sit in darkness. I entered the house of dust and I saw the kings of the earth, their crowns put away for ever...they who had stood in the place of gods...stood now like servants to fetch baked meats in the house of dust... (28)

These metaphors are striking. The dust and the clay that the people consume suggest the emptiness expected in the next life. The garments of feathers speak to the lack of comfort provided by the afterlife. Indeed, if we compare it directly to some of the most common metaphors of the Christian imagination, the comforting light and the nourishment of the garden-scape, the total absence of stimuli in this image is disturbing. These metaphors suggest a culture that found little comfort in the idea of an afterlife and illustrate that a paradisaal view of the spiritual world is not, as many in the modern West believe, an absolute given.

Indeed, the adventure that follows Enkidu's death seems to suggest that humanity's purpose is achievement in the earthly realm rather than the preparation for the next life. Gilgamesh's reaction to his friend's death is in direct contrast to his earlier attitude. Holding his friend's body in his arms, Gilgamesh exclaims, "How can I rest, how can I be at peace? Despair is in my heart. What my brother is now, that shall I be when I

am dead. Because I am afraid of death, I will go as best I can to find Utnapishtim" (30). His sorrow for his friend and fear of death leads to Gilgamesh's most heroic act, a journey through the underworld in hopes of securing eternal life. Here, he finds little hope for the future, and although eternal youth comes within his reach, he ultimately falls short of his goal. His quest for immortality a failure, he returns to Uruk where he experiences an epiphany. As he examines his city's strong walls, he realizes the necessity of human effort and becomes content in reinforcing his city's battlements and in building his earthly kingdom. These things will last beyond his death and are celebrated as the achievement of his destiny. The final thought of this ancient text on the concept of eternity seems to be this: humanity's purpose is to build fame within this world so that one's reputation might be remembered, for no paradise awaits after this life.

Certainly, this belief echoes throughout the writings of pagan artists. Centuries later, a poet amongst the Anglo-Saxons expresses similar notions about life and death, and the cries of the "Wife's Lament" echo those of Gilgamesh:

Under this oak tree, in this earthly barrow
Old is the earth-cave, all I do is yearn
The dales are dark with high hills above,
Sharp hedge surrounds it, overgrown with briars,
And joyless is the place. (29-33)⁸

The imagery of this oak tree, which is often connected to death in Norse and Anglo-Saxon mythology, points to the great fear of these people of exile. Under this system,

⁸ While interpreting the "Wife's Lament" remains a perilous exercise, the imagery of the "oak tree" and the "earth cave" are often associated with death in Germanic cultures. Thus, a strong case can be made the wife's lamentation comes from beyond the grave.

death becomes the ultimate exile, a road that separates a person from the community in an irrevocable way. Another Anglo-Saxon epic, *Beowulf*, affirms this sentiment. Like Gilgamesh, Beowulf, the most famous hero of Anglo-Saxon literature, expresses a desire to be remembered at the moment of his death:

Order my troop to construct a barrow
On a headland on the coast, after my pyre has cooled.
It will loom on the horizon at Hronesness
And be a reminder among my people
So that in coming times crews under sails
Will call it Beowulf's Barrowí (2802-7)

Interestingly, a few hundred years after the Anglo-Saxon poet pens those lines, the great Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas expresses a very different outlook on what awaits humanity:

Since, then, the bodily creation will at last be disposed in harmony with the state of man -- since men, of course, will not only be freed from corruption but also clothed with glory, as what has been said makes clear -- necessarily even the bodily creation will achieve a kind of resplendence in its own way. (349)

Where the kings of *Gilgamesh* have put away their crowns to wallow in the dust, Aquinas describes a place wherein all will be "clothed with glory." While the wife laments her imprisonment under the tree, Aquinas claims that people will be "freed from corruption." The difference in thinking between the pain of *Gilgamesh* and the "resplendence" of the Christian afterlife is immense, and before we can appreciate the variety of medieval thought on the afterlife, we must understand its evolution.

Christian images of the afterlife develop from two primary sources: the Hebrew and Greco-Roman,⁹ and these two traditions helped shaped the beliefs of the early church. Because theologians recognize some influence on the Hebrew by the Greek, the Greek shall be examined first. In the same way that the Christian concept of eternity developed over time, Greek perceptions of afterlife evolved slowly, and it would be impractical for this study to deal with all the schools of Greek thought on the afterlife. Instead, the wiser course might be to examine those works that were most influential on Christian thought, and for most of the Western world, Homer and Plato spoke, and continue to speak, most forcefully.

Early Greek mythology describes an underworld that is nearly as bleak as the Sumerian's, and Homer's epic offers some insight into these beliefs.¹⁰ One striking image of the afterlife is found in *The Odyssey*. As Odysseus arrives at an entrance to the underworld to question the sage Tiresias, he finds himself surrounded by the shades of the dead. When Tiresias finally arrives, the shadowy form asks, "What brings you here, / forsaking the light of day / to see this joyless kingdom of the dead?" (10: 103-105). As in *Gilgamesh*, Homer describes an afterlife void of sensory detail, a place where all are miserable and where punishment and reward are not part of these beings' existence. Death is a joyless place only because those who dwell within are not living. During his conversation with the sage, Odysseus recognizes his mother standing amongst the other dead. She seems ashamed of her state and cannot bear to look her son in the eyes. Her

⁹ Russell agrees, noting that "the Christian heaven is essentially Jewish in idea and image but influenced by Greco-Roman culture" (18).

¹⁰ Of course, dating the Homeric epics is a perilous enterprise. In making this argument, I am taking the moderate position that regardless of when the poems were actually penned, they reflect the ideals of early Greek culture.

embarrassment further emphasizes the sorry state of the shades. When Odysseus makes an offering of blood so that he may speak to her, she questions his motives for coming: "Oh my son -- what brings you down to the world / of death and darkness? You are still alive! / It's hard for the living to catch a glimpse of this" (11: 177-179). Her words emphasize that the living should not seek the land of the dead before their time, and what follows is one of the most gut-wrenching scenes of the *Odyssey*. Overcome by emotions, Odysseus reaches out to embrace his mother only to have his arms pass through her incorporeal form. Unsatisfied by his inability to experience her physically, he questions whether her shade is merely an illusion sent to torment him. In response, his mother articulates the mindset of the dead:

This is no deception sent by Queen Persephone
this is just the way of mortals when we die.
Sinews no longer bind the flesh and bones together --
the fire in all its fury burns the body down to ashes
once life slips away from the white bones, and the spirit,
rustling, flitters away ... flown like a dream. (11: 246-251)

In this speech, Epicaste explains that death separates the soul from the body, and once so removed, the soul exists in a sort of half-life, wherein the personality and bodily image of the living person persists but where the pleasures of the physical are lost. The language employed here speaks of loss and regret, for the dead have lost their sense of wholeness and are doomed to this dream-like state, an existence that rarely portrayed as desirable within Greek literature.

The nature of these shades is a controversial issue. From this scene in the *Odyssey*, as well as other occurrences of shades in Homeric literature, it seems that these

shades are immortal, emotional, and rational, while at the same time lacking concrete form. Certainly in the shade of Epicaste, we find a figure capable of shame, requiring sustenance, but ultimately formless, having been separated from its physical body by the process of death. The idea that the body and the soul are two separate parts of the individual is important within Christian theology as well, and it is Plato who is most often given credit for formalizing the theory that gives the soul primacy over the body as the center of rationality and morality (Claus 7).¹¹ However, Alan E. Segal argues that the greatest influence of Greek thinking upon Christian theology was not simply that the body and soul are separate entities but rather that the immortality of the soul represents humanity's natural state of being, and this idea is most famously articulated within the works of Plato.

In *Phaedo*, Plato certainly articulates a much different view of the afterlife than that which is found in Homer. In this text, the question of what happens after death is of great concern, for Socrates must defend his decision to take his own life rather than accept exile. To defend his actions, he must argue one of two basic positions. Either he, like the Epicureans, declares that all aspects of a human are completely destroyed at death, or he must claim that something better awaits him after death, as did the Orphics who argued for the "deification" of the deceased (Segal 221). Indeed, as he recounts the events surrounding Socrates' death, Plato's position certainly sounds Orphic:

¹¹ For an example of this, see Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* in which he explains that "the soul and the body will be related in a different order in the first generation of man and in his resurrection" (310). Aquinas argues the earthly body must necessarily be replaced after death by one that is fit for the immortal soul.

So that's why I am not so resentful, but rather am hopeful that there is something more in store for those who've died -- in fact, as we've long been told, something far better for the good than for the wicked. (7)

However, while he certainly supports the Orphic position of rewards and punishment for the departed, Plato's vision of the immortality of the soul focuses much more on the intellect and the superiority of the soul to the physical body. He writes:

As long as we possess the body, our soul is contaminated with such an evil, we'll surely never adequately gain what we desire -- and that, we say is the truth...Besides it fills us up with lust and desires...so that really and truly we are, as the saying goes, never able to think of anything because of it...Well now, it really has been shown that if we're ever going to know anything purely, we must be rid of it, and must vie the objects themselves with the soul by itself...Because if we can know nothing purely in the body's company, then one of two things must be true: either knowledge is nowhere to be gained, or else it is for the dead. (12)

In this way, death is a purification of the mind. By separating the intellect from a perversely flawed body, the soul is able to comprehend truth. For Plato, the soul must live on after death, or there will be no opportunity for true knowledge.

In addition to stressing the importance of the soul in the pursuit of knowledge, Plato also stresses the immortality of the soul. For Plato, the soul will not only live on after a human's death, but it also exists before that person is ever born. He argues that human beings enter the world with knowledge and that because of this, the soul must predate the body. In this way, he describes the process of learning as being a "recollection" of things that the soul has previously known (22). Under this system, the soul is something unseen, yet at the same time it is indestructible. Here, we find no talk of a physical location to house the immortal soul, for the soul is never at rest. While his

view of immortality offers rewards for the just and punishment for the wicked, his system focuses much more on the cultivation of the intellect than of morality. He posits a cycle of reincarnation wherein the souls of the wicked "wander about until, owing to the desire of the corporeal element attendant upon them, they are once more imprisoned in a body" while those who "have practiced social goodness" are likely to return as creatures that cultivate such virtues or to come back as "decent men" (31-32). However, he stresses that it is only the philosopher, the person who loves knowledge above all things, who is fit to join in the company of the gods. This seems to me a very important distinction to make, for it places the purpose of life on the perfection of the individual soul itself rather than upon the deeds of the body. While many early Christian theologians found these ideas threatening to their beliefs of a created soul and of every person's need for a Savior, the ideas found in *Phaedro* and Plato's other work certainly influenced the thinking of later Christian theologians, such as Origen, whose work was important in developing the Christian understanding of the afterlife (Patterson 22).

Of course, it is impossible to deal fully with Plato's beliefs regarding the immortality of the soul and its ramifications within the scope of this dissertation. What cannot be denied, however, is the impact that Plato's discourse on the topic of death had on future writers. Plato's arguments are used in early church writings both as support for Christian doctrine and as heretical ideas to be attacked. Theologians' uneasy relationship with Plato's theories most likely stems from their own questions about the nature of the afterlife, and the debate regarding whether humanity's existence in heaven was physical or spiritual was certainly a heated one. Regardless, Plato's writings did influence the

early church, if for no other reason than for the way in which acceptance of Plato's theories on the primacy of the soul made Christian belief easier to accept in some circles. Therefore, it could be said that Plato's influence is not only found in the way that his philosophy popularized the belief in the immortal soul but also in the way that it challenges later Christian doctrine. Certainly, the theologians and philosophers that follow him must grapple with his positions regarding the primacy of the soul over the body and of its immortality. Indeed, Greek ideas regarding death had a great impact upon Christianity's Hebrew predecessors and certainly affected the writings of Christianity's most important theologian, St. Paul.

While Paul's biography certainly suggests exposure to Greek education, Paul's own writing focuses upon his Jewish heritage. Indeed, many of the images that we find in later Christian writings regarding the afterlife spring from Judaism. However, resurrection and immortality were contentious subjects, possibly because early Judaic writings offer few specific details about what awaits the soul after death. In Kohler's notable exploration of early Hebrew ideas about the afterlife, he suggests that *ölSheol*, the name given to the shadowy place inhabited after death, had little connection to the ethics of the religion (279). At this time, Judaism was a religion that focused on maintaining harmony with God on Earth; therefore, its practitioners had little reason to look to the future. Certainly a simple count of the number of times that *ölSheol* is mentioned in the Old Testament illustrates that the afterlife was not central to the faith. Phillip S. Johnston indicates that while death is mentioned one thousand times, *Sheol* is only referenced one hundred times (72). These figures suggest that while death was a

major concern of the Hebrew people, the idea of a physical location for the afterlife was not fundamental to their understanding of it. However, Johnston goes on to note that Sheol was used not as a concept to be mentioned casually or in simple report of the past but instead to indicate personal emotional involvement, in apprehension of one's own destiny (72). Because Sheol was such a personal idea, the Hebrew tradition treats its readers to few narratives within the underworld. Put simply, journeys through the underworld, such as those we see in Greek mythology or in later dream visions, do not exist in early Hebrew art, and this lack of detail complicates discussions about its metaphorical spaces. The few details that the Old Testament provides suggest that Sheol was a place of quiet despair. The major metaphors for it found in the books of *Psalms* and *Job* include "pit," "dust," and "fire," images that seem more at place in pagan works such as *Gilgamesh* than in later monotheistic writing. Regardless of its physical description, it seems clear that within early Jewish thinking Yahweh does not dwell in Sheol. Because of this, death becomes a moment of separation from the deity rather than a moment of joy and the afterlife becomes a place of exile rather than unification.

However, as Judaism evolved, ideas regarding an ethical afterlife became much more common. R.H. Charles explains that this development arose from Israel's increasing focus on monotheism. He argues that "so long indeed as Yahweh's jurisdiction was conceived as limited to this life, a Yahwistic eschatology of the individual could not exist; but at last when Israel reached the great truth of monotheism, the way was prepared for the moralization of the future" (157). Certainly, a system of rewards and punishments in the afterlife are an important part of this theodicy, for it

provides a means to justify God's goodness in the face of a sometimes inhospitable world. Daniel Cohn-Sherbok explains that within later Jewish imagination the afterlife is broken into a number of stages. The final stage will include a judgment of the dead during which the righteous will enter heaven (*Gan Eden*) and those who have broken the laws will enter hell (*Gehinnom*) (26). This idea is articulated within Midrash Konen's post-exile depiction of *Gan Eden*'s physical properties many images familiar to ideas found within Christian tradition. He describes heaven as a large city consisting of five chambers. These chambers each house different populations of the righteous and are organized around a strict hierarchy. The imagery used to describe the physical landscape is an amalgamation of natural and urban beauty, as finished cedar walls give way to a central forest garden. The highest chamber is adorned with precious stones and surrounds the cultivated banks of the River Gihon. It is in this chamber that the Messiah resides, mourning for the exiled and unrighteous (26-28). Despite detailed images such as this, the issue of the resurrection of the dead was always a contentious issue for Hebrew theologians; however, these images would become a fundamental part of the Christian offshoot of Judaism that would explode in popularity in the first few centuries of the current era.

While the Hebraic Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus form the foundation of the Christian belief system, Paul of Tarsus is the person most responsible for developing these teachings into doctrine and for making Christianity a major world religion. Paul's writings in the New Testament shape Christian beliefs regarding the nature of the soul and the afterlife, and his influence cannot be overstated. He is also of

prime importance in our understanding of the evolution of the Christian view of the afterlife, for in his writings, we find a fusion of Hebrew, Greek, and Christian influences. Although most of what we know about St. Paul comes from second hand sources, his influences are clear from his own writing. He was certainly a proud Jew. Indeed, A.N. Wilson describes his writing as expressing "not only his Jewishness but his ultra-Jewishness" (30). Paul's pride in his Hebrew heritage is evident when he writes:

If anyone else thinks that he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for Zeal, persecuting the church, as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. (*Phillippians* 3:5)

However, he frequently lashes out at those who cling to Jewish doctrine, and he asserts his willingness to give these things up for the teachings of Jesus. In addition, he was a speaker of the Greek language and a well-educated one at that. His speech at the Aeropagus in Athens illustrates some command of Greek rhetoric, and the response of the audience of this speech indicates that his words were well received.¹² One common criticism of Paul is that he rewrites Jesus's intentions, creating a religion very different from the one found within the Gospels. However, it seems more likely that Paul's intentions are to interpret Jesus's teachings, which are largely directed towards Jewish audiences, for Gentiles. Whatever the case, Paul's writings include several discussions on

¹² The biography suggested here is drawn primarily from Paul's own writings and those of Luke. It should be noted, however, that other sources call some of his claims into question. The Ebionites in particular view Paul's claims as lies. In various Ebionite works, Paul is sometimes dismissed as a Greek playing at being a Jew at other times as being a Romanist attempting to turn the true followers of Jesus into Romans (33). Regardless of these details, it seems safe to say that Paul was a man influenced by Judaism, the teachings of Jesus, and a Greek education.

death and dying, and they certainly expand upon the previously established Hebrew ideas regarding the afterlife.

Paul's writings on the soul express a surprisingly more Platonic view of the afterlife than is found in many of the Christian writers who follow him. Indeed, Gerd Ludemann notes that Paul's audience "was quite accustomed to the notion of a post-mortem assessment of an individual's life, and was even amenable to the concept of some sort of reward or punishment on the basis of one's deeds" (126-27). However, Paul's thinking diverges from that of the Hellenistic world in several meaningful places, and perhaps the greatest of these is in Paul's insistence on a bodily resurrection. Perhaps the clearest insight into Paul's vision of the afterlife is to be found in a letter to the church in Thessalonica. In it, he describes a future time at which point those who are "asleep" shall arise. He explains:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (*1Thessalonians* 4:6-18)

The idea of resurrection, especially one which includes the physical body, would have been particularly troubling to those influenced by the Platonic school of thought.

Certainly, a survey of early responses to the Christian doctrine of resurrection illustrates

the difficulties Platonic thinkers had with Paul's ideas.¹³ In the third century, Porphyry questions the passage in *Thessalonians*, noting:

This belief is quackery of the first rank: that the weight of our mortal flesh should behave as if it were of the nature of winged birds and could navigate the winds as easily as ships cross the sea! Even if such things could happen, it would be a violation of nature and hence completely unfitting. (Hoffman 68)

An earlier Platonist, Celsus, echoes this complaint:

For what human soul would have any further desire for a body that has rotted?...For what body after being completely corrupted, could return to its original nature and that same condition which it had before it dissolved. As they have nothing to say in reply, they escape to a most outrageous refuge by saying that "anything is possible in God." But indeed, neither can God do what is shameful nor does he desire what is against nature. (Chadwick 274f)

Despite these objections, Paul's success as a proselytizer comes from his ability to fuse Hebrew, Greek, and Christian ideas into a satisfying system. He established a new religion that was built on the frame of Judaism but that eliminated obstacles such as circumcision in order to smooth the way for his Gentile converts. Furthermore, as we have seen, his doctrine of bodily resurrection challenged both Hebraic and Platonic understanding of the afterlife, and his ideas served as a catalyst for those who followed him.

Throughout Paul's discussion of the soul, we find few descriptions of the space of the afterlife. For this, we must turn to the writings of another important apostle, Saint

¹³ For further discussion of objections to Paul's doctrine of resurrection, see Gerd Ludemann's *Paul: Founder of Christianity*, which details the objections of philosophers and artists such as Roman Fronto and Porphyry.

John. Penned between 70 and 98 A.D., Saint John's *Revelation* is an apocalyptic text that establishes many of the images used by Christians to describe the physical space of the afterlife. In this work, angels bring the apostle John to heaven in order to record the coming of God's judgment upon the earth. Perhaps the most important image contained within John's vision is that of New Jerusalem. He writes, "Behold, a throne was set in heaven and round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting and before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal" (4:2-6). Richard Emmerson notes that John's landscape influenced medieval writings of all genres (313-314), from the theological such as Bonaventure's claim that practicing the theological virtues makes our soul "like the heavenly Jerusalem" (89-90) to the literary such as Chaucer's Parson explanation that the goal of the Christian pilgrim should be "that highte Jerusalem celestial" (51).

As influential as *Revelation* became, it is hardly the only work of this genre. Other apocalyptic visions followed, and while some maintained the tradition of the heavenly city, others incorporated Edenic images and in doing so popularized the image of the terrestrial paradise. One such work is "The Apocalypse of Peter." Often dated to the later second century A.D., this text purports to describe a vision of the afterlife granted to the apostle Peter. After journeying through hell, the saint is taken to:

a very great region outside this world exceedingly bright with light, and the air of that place illuminated with the rays of the sun, and the earth itself flowering with blossoms that do not fade, and full of spices and plants, fair flowering and incorruptible and the inhabitants in that place were clad with raiment of shining angles, and their raiment was like their land. (610-611)

This image, with its insistence on the perfection of the natural world, is characteristic of representations of the otherworld that focus upon the terrestrial paradise. Often times such works imagine paradise as a specific physical location found upon earth. However, at other times, the image is used figuratively to describe a place of spiritual perfection. Regardless, these systems use the orderly state of the physical landscape to reflect the order of God's kingdom. They imagine paradise as a return to God's original plan for the world and as a reinstatement of the lost Eden.

Despite these influential traditions, the earliest non-apocalyptic Christian writings are surprisingly quiet on the nature of heaven and hell. This is perhaps one repercussion of Plato's influence upon the early Church. Segal explains that Plato's ideas about the immortality of the soul were very attractive to pagans. Indeed, the more educated the pagan the more attractive Plato's ideas seem to have been (554). In addition, the early Church fathers did not agree on when the resurrection could take place, a question that is much more central to the formation of a logical doctrine than are questions surrounding the place the body should inhabit after its resurrection. An examination of early Christian writing shows that the primary controversy regarding the afterlife focused on whether the body and the soul were both resurrected; whether only the soul lived forever; whether the resurrection occurred at death or after the one thousand year reign of Christ or some other time; and whether all people were resurrected or just the faithful.¹⁴ It is only after these issues developed that we see theologians begin dealing with physical descriptions of the afterlife, and those writings which sought to

¹⁴ For a more detailed examination of these early arguments, see Charles E. Hill's *Regnum Caelorum*.

explore spatial issues both employed the metaphors for paradise already in circulation and created new images. While apocalyptic visions, like those attributed to Saints John and Peter, certainly played an important role in the shaping of Christian beliefs regarding the afterlife, it was the theologians who hammered out the doctrine. The Christian writers that followed Paul had a difficult task, for they had to promote the idea of resurrection in a world that was well acquainted with the Platonic ideas of the immortality of the soul. Indeed, the idea of a bodily resurrection could be seen as a step backwards when compared to the limitlessness of Plato's description of the soul. Perhaps because of this problem, early theologians devoted more time to the question of the place the body would inhabit upon rebirth, turning as it were to the often neglected question of *where*. Of these images, three become particularly important in medieval Europe: the celestial city, the terrestrial paradise, and the mystic union.

Surprisingly, the image of a terrestrial paradise seems to have been the most widespread within early church writings. Perhaps because of the tradition that says looking on the face of God brings death, very few early medieval Christian illustrations extend all the way to God's throne. Instead, they much more commonly depict the eternal space of the blessed as being located away from God's own dwelling place. Consider *Drythelm's Vision* from the eighth century. In this narrative, the dreamer's guide brings him to a bright land surrounded by a wall. As the pair suddenly appears on the top of the wall, he sees an earthly landscape filled with bright flowers:

Within it there was a vast and a delightful field, so full of fragrant flowers that the odor of its delightful sweetness immediately expelled the stinkí so great was the

light in this place that it seemed to exceed the brightness of day or the sun in its median height. (2)

Here we see a definite shift from the symbolically charged descriptions of the apocalypses. Instead, the image is that of earthly perfection, nature flourishing in its intended state. The guide explains that this place is not heaven itself but is instead the location wherein those who depart from the body after doing good works but who are not so perfect as to be immediately admitted into heaven wait for the time in which they can enter paradise. However, the representation does not shift as the narrator gets close to God's throne. Instead, the descriptions remain natural and only become more and more idealized until it reaches a point in which the narrator becomes indifferent to the previous landscape. Visions such as these were very common and were perhaps more common in the early medieval period than those depicting the urban setting of the New Jerusalem. These unspoiled landscapes, perfect in ways that earth can never hope to be, suggest a return to Eden and a return to God's intended order for the world. In this way, these descriptions of paradise serve as a utopian vision of what the world could have been and also anticipate what humanity will one day enjoy again.

In the "Apocalypse of Saint Paul," a fourth century vision mistakenly attributed to its titular saint, the narrator travels through several such natural landscapes; however, his ultimate destination is a walled city. The arrangement of this text demonstrates two concepts relating to the employment of paradisaic images. First, this text illustrates a second important metaphor used for discussions of heaven and/or paradise: the celestial city. Second, the narrative demonstrates a common motif in this sort of literature: the use

of a natural landscape to transition to the heavenly city. After exploring this locale, his guide leads him back through the landscape, and in doing so he summarizes the varied spaces that he experienced: "he led me out of the city through the midst of trees and back from the place of the land of good things and set me at the river of milk and honey: and after that he led me unto the ocean that beareth the foundation of heaven" (541-42).

Under this system, the city is the seat of Christ's power, the locus of his kingdom and the final dwelling place of the saints. While perhaps the most dominant metaphor in medieval and modern Christianity, in earlier writings the city had not yet achieved its unrivaled status. However, theologians certainly associated heaven with the city from very early on. Drawing heavily from John's *Revelation*, the image of the city became a very important metaphor for heavenly spaces. However, these images were not cities in the earthly sense. Instead, they idealized the city-scape, focusing on the best that the urban space has to offer. These images suggest the supreme order of heaven as everything: the streets are straight, the land is divided into neat divisions, and any vegetation is perfectly cultivated. As noted above, these images often make use of natural landscapes. For example, in "The Apocalypse of Saint Paul," the narrator first comes to a cultivated land in which "there were trees planted by the bank of that river, full of fruit" (629). Everything in this space is orderly and produces in abundance. However, the natural is ultimately subordinate to the urban, which represents the seat of God's power. His angelic guide explains that when Christ returns, "The first earth will be dissolved and this land of promise will then be revealed" and then the Lord Jesus Christ "will come with all his saints to dwell in it" and they will eat of the good things which I shall now show you.

(629). Once again, we find a vision imagining paradise as a return to Eden; however, the text does not stop there. As the pair travel, they come to a lake in the middle of the garden that contains an island which is home to the City of Christ. As Paul journeys around and eventually within this city, he encounters a very ordered system of walls and thrones, centered upon a great altar. The writer emphasizes the orderly nature of God's plan for the future of the world, certainly a comfort to those early Christians living in the midst of oppression and persecution.

The late second century theologian Tertullian's work uses urban imagery in a different way in his discussions of the afterlife. While his work is heavily influenced by early theologians such as Justin and Irenaeus, his examinations of the soul were much more specific in their images of heavenly spaces. In his work *De anima*, Tertullian succinctly defines death: "This, then, is the function of death – the complete separation of body and soul" (293). In his system, death completely severs the ties between the body and the soul. As he deals with the arguments of those who posit that in order to be human the body must be present, he explains, "if any of the soul is there, you have life" (292). Tertullian notes that the natural conclusion of his argument is to question where the soul will go "to find lodging when it is expelled naked from the body" (295). To answer this question, he turns his attention first to hell. This space he explains is "a profound and vast space hidden away in the deepest interior of the world" (298). He envisions hell as being a "subterranean region," hidden in the bowels of the earth, existing over the abyss which lies beneath it (298). With this point of comparison established, Tertullian moves to his primary heavenly image – the closed gate. This metaphor for the heavenly space is

important. Unlike the wide open spaces of hell, access to the heavenly space is restricted. Indeed, only martyrs have access to the heavenly space. All other people, pagan and Christian alike, must travel to the open space of hell to await Christ's second coming. He repeats this image of a closed heaven in his *Apologeticum*, employing the metaphor of a "wall," which also serves the purpose of closing off access to the heavenly space (117). This wall divides heaven from the earthly realm, denying access to the unworthy. Tertullian's depictions suggest some interesting ideas about how and why certain images are chosen. In the metaphor of the wall and closed gate, Tertullian emphasizes the privileged position of those who are granted access. In doing so, he is able to justify those behaviors which he finds important. For Tertullian, the behavior he stresses is martyrdom; however, future writers will employ heavenly images to reinforce different ideals.¹⁵ While his illustrations are not as complete as later explorations of heavenly realms, we find here an emphasis on urban details such as gated walls, features of many major cities in the ancient world. Tertullian's writings also illustrate the tendency to connect hell with natural spaces and heaven with urban ones.

Many later Christian writings continue the practice of connecting heaven with urban spaces. Indeed, as Christianity became more and more central to Roman culture, writers frequently made use of Rome as an image for heaven. This, along with the importance of Saint John's *Revelation* and the urban nature of the empire, might account for the increasing usage of urban metaphors for heavenly spaces. Perhaps the most

¹⁵ In Chapter 5, I shall discuss the *Pearl's* use of heaven to assert a hierarchical system of social organization on Earth. Likewise, the *SEL's* Brendan's Voyage uses the image of paradise to reaffirm the social practice of pilgrimage. Another example of artists using heavenly metaphors for social and political reasons can be found in Augustine's *De civitate Dei* in which he uses the city to argue that God's intended social order requires humans to accept their social position without complaint.

famous and influential use of urban metaphors in the discussion of heaven is found in Saint Augustine's *De civitate Dei*. Augustine lived in a time of tumultuous change. Christianity had emerged out of persecution to become the most powerful religion in the Roman Empire. However, in Augustine's time, the Christianization of the Empire was not yet complete. Paganism did not simply disappear, and throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, conflicts between Christians and pagans were not uncommon.¹⁶ Indeed, Christianity itself was not unified, and the Church found itself engaged in the suppression of heretics and schismatics. In addition to all of this, when Alaric sacked Rome in 410, it was a serious shock to a culture that had been the world's dominant force for centuries. It seems that Augustine wrote *De civitate Dei* as a reaction to these forces. Those looking for a scapegoat for Rome's fall from power had a convenient target in the Christian Church, and Augustine needed to defend the Church against such an attack. In doing so, he establishes the image of two cities, one of earthly Rome and the other of God's heavenly city, and like Tertullian and the others before him, he uses these images to assert social and political ideals for life on Earth. However, his approach is very different, and because Augustine exerts so much influence on the Christian writers who follow him, understanding *De civitate Dei* is a fundamental part of exploring the tradition of the celestial city that follow his text.

While the vast majority of *De civitate Dei* uses the city as a symbol for conflicting belief systems on earth, as he closes the work, he turns his attention to the afterlife. In

¹⁶ Gerard O'Daly lists several such conflicts, including an incident in 421 in which a Church in Carthage was demolished by pagan protestors. Even physical violence was not unheard of as is represented by the clashes in Sufes and Calama around the turn of the fifth century (8).

doing so, Augustine focuses on two primary sources: *The Revelation of Saint John*, which serves as the foundation for his treatise, and Plato's writing, which he seeks to refute. Augustine figures heaven as the New Jerusalem and uses this urban metaphor to illustrate heaven as the center of God's kingdom, a place of peace and social order, and the future hub of Christian culture.¹⁷ However, like many of the early texts, Augustine seems most concerned with discussing the nature of the physical body in the afterlife. He primarily opposes the belief of Plato, Cicero, and other Classical philosophers that earthly bodies cannot continue to exist after death. Against these theories he argues the omnipotence of God, he points out that some terrestrial beings such as birds are able to resist the pull of the earth, and he notes that Christ himself ascended to heaven in an earthly form. Indeed, he establishes the very important idea that heaven is a physical place inhabited by beings clad in physical bodies. However, he makes a crucial distinction which separates him from Irenaeus and others who projected heaven as a place of bodily pleasures. Augustine states, "The flesh then shall be spiritual, and subject to the spirit, but still flesh, not spirit, as the spirit itself, when subject to the flesh, was fleshly, but still spirit and not flesh" (XXII.21). Thus, while those in heaven are indeed clad in earthly bodies, they are no longer subject to bodily needs and desires. Instead, the order of terrestrial life is reversed, making the body subject to the needs of the spirit. As an example of this change, he puts forth the example of the eye, which he believes shall have "a vastly superior power" (XXII. 29). He explains that the elect will not derive this power from keen sight, as one

¹⁷ Utopian readings of *De civitate Dei* are very common and will be pursued in the second chapter of this dissertation. Frequently these readings, such as Elain Pagels' "The Politics of Paradise," focus on Augustine's insistence that sin was brought into the world by disobedience to God's rule (by both Satan and Adam). The heavenly city then serves as a utopian image for the perfect society that would have existed and will exist again under God's rule.

might expect, for keen sight is a ðbodily distinctionö (XXII.29). Rather, the superior power will lie in its ability to see that which is incorporeal. Ultimately, this conversion of the flesh from bodily needs to spiritual needs is what creates the eternal felicity of heaven, for it removes the earthly taint and allows the individual to focus on God. This portrayal of heaven was hardly revolutionary. Indeed, Augustine himself stresses several times uses the argument that ðthis is what the world already believesö in stating his position. However, his ability to articulate this theology clearly and respond in a reasonable way to the beliefs of Plato, Porphyry, and other Classical theologians helped to establish the primacy of the belief in ðspiritual bodies,ö and it is the system that most medieval works use in their portrayals of the urban paradise.

As noted above, other writers have used the image of Rome as a metaphor for God's kingdom. An example of this comparative use of Rome can be found in Eusebius's early fourth century work *Vita Constantini*. In it, he compares the kingdom of heaven to the kingdom of Rome, and the Emperor Constantine to God the Father. He begins his oration by praising God and explaining that God's ðministersö are the ðheavenly hosts; his armies the supernal powers, who owe allegiance to him as their Master, Lord, and Kingö (910). God presides over these hosts as a wise ruler. His kingdom is a ðvast expanseö in which those who ðinhabit his royal mansionsí perform, in honor of their sovereign, their appointed courseö (910). This representation of heaven presents us with the image of God as a bringer of social order, the lord of a heavenly utopia. Having established the appeal of God's rulership, Eusebius then connects Constantine and Rome to this image of God and heaven. He writes, ðOur divine emperor, receiving, as it were a

transcript of the Divine sovereignty, directs, an imitation of God himself, the administration of this world's affairs" (911). Throughout the text that follows, Eusebius illustrates that Constantine's role in Rome is much the same as God's in the heavenly kingdom. At the same time, he consistently expresses the idea that, while Roman society would ideally mirror the heavenly order, earthly Rome is but a pale imitation of the perfection of the heavenly kingdom. He explains that the emperor "knows that present things, subject as they are to decay and death, are not worthy to be compared with him who is sovereign of all; therefore, it is that longs for the incorruptible and incorporeal kingdom of God" (916). In this way, Eusebius uses the city of Rome to explain heaven by both illustrating what God's kingdom is and what it is not. Therein is the power of the urban metaphor for heaven. The city is the center of human civilization, and because of its importance, it defines human society, for good and for ill. The metaphor of the city provides audiences with a point of reference and provides poets, authors, and theologians the means to describe the indescribable.

Another metaphor of some importance was that of spiritual union. Under this system, the soul's ultimate destination is within the person of God or Christ. While the best known examples of a soul's spiritual union come from the mystic writers of the late Middle Ages such as Bernard of Clairvaux, the idea that the soul's ultimate destiny is to enter into a union with the deity is as ancient as the organized church. The theology of the soul developed slowly and was a controversial issue, for while a few theologians imagined the union with God as part of the soul's return to perfection, others worried that such dogma suggested the nullification of the individual's identity in the afterlife. One of

the most notable early Church fathers to use this metaphor was the third century theologian Origen. Drawing heavily from the work of Plato, Origen was a controversial figure, and great controversy exists regarding his actual influence on medieval writers and their theology. However, E. Ann Matter argues that Origen's writings were widely disseminated, noting that over forty manuscripts of his homilies on *The Song of Songs* dating from the sixth to the fifteenth century survive and that they have been discovered across the European continent (35). She argues that the reason that he is not more widely cited is his reputation as a heretic, but she finds a flowering of Origen's influence in the works of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, culminating with Bernard of Clairvaux's homilies on the *Song of Songs* (37-39). Furthermore, regardless of the direct textual influences, Origen's allegorical work with *The Song of Songs*, was groundbreaking and widely imitated. The famed modern theologian, Richard Simon famously remarked, "Most of the fathers who lived after Origen scarcely did anything but copy his commentaries and treatises on scripture" (qtd. Trigg 62). For this reason, understanding Origen's ideas on the spiritual union of souls with God will provide a basis for appreciating the third image of heaven as a union with God, which develops in the high middle ages.

As noted earlier, one of the most troublesome issues of the second and third century church was the debate regarding the nature of the body after death. These discussions typically focused on issues of substance, that is to say, on whether the resurrected body would be physical or spiritual. Origen's writings would become very instrumental in resolving such disputes, and in these matters, he was influenced greatly

by his teacher Plotinus, the third century Greek philosopher. Plotinus was a Platonic dualist, and his writing maintains that the soul and the body are two distinct entities (Gerson 127). Throughout his work, he energetically defends the Platonic premise that the soul represents the center of human existence and intellect. Gerson asserts that Plotinus's was himself a mystic whose chief longing was for a permanent union with God (219). Certainly Prophyry's biography of Plotinus describes four experiences during which Plotinus spiritually connects to God. Within his own philosophical writings, Plotinus suggests that the soul's ultimate desire is to become one with its creator. For example, in *The Enneads* he writes, "So it is with individual souls; the appetite for the divine intellect urges them to return to their source" (338). However, the soul's longing to return to God clashes with some base desires within it, and if the soul gives into these desires and takes on a body, "It has fallen ... debarred from expressing itself through its intellectual phase...it is a captive; this is the burial, the encavement, or the Soul" (339).¹⁸ While the mystical writings of the High Middle Ages are not neo-Plutonic in nature, the idea that the soul's ultimate desire is to find its way into unity with God becomes a central concept of the new mysticism movement.

Working from this foundation, Origen picks up Plotinus's mantle in stressing the corruption inherent in the physical body and in emphasizing the transcendence of the soul. In his last and most influential work *Contra Celsum*, Origen crafts a powerful defense of his religion against the teachings of the pagan philosopher Celsum. As he moves to close this treatise, Origen turns his attentions to death and judgment, themes

¹⁸ Plotinus goes on to reconcile the soul's choosing to go to a body with God's "sowing of them."

that he had dealt with in earlier works.¹⁹ In responding to Celsum's suggestion that Christians are inconsistent in their beliefs regarding the purity of material bodies, Origen emphasizes the greater importance of the soul, explaining that "we maintain the soul, and especially the rational soul, is more precious than any body, since the soul contains that which is after the image of the Creator whereas this is in no sense true of the body. In our opinion also God is not a material substance" (VIII.49). For Origen, God created man in his spiritual image, not his physical image. The physical body is a corrupted thing, and it deserves to be cast away and replaced with a new body at the resurrection. It is important to note that Origen stresses that this new body will be a physical one.²⁰ However, in his commentaries on *Jeremiah*, Origen explores the contradictions between a physical resurrection and a spiritual God. Crouzel explains that for Origen the controversy rests on the fifteenth chapter of *Corinthians* and that the "mystery of the relation between the earthly body and the glorious body lies in their identity and dissimilarity" (245). Indeed, Origen goes so far as to suggest that God may have created other worlds before this one, and in doing so, proposes that if the soul is bound to a physical body for eternity, it risks abandonment (Trigg 33). Under this scheme, for a body to be immortal, it must be spiritual, and Origen imagines this transformation takes place through a union with God. Trigg explains that Origen sees two stages in the development of the soul after death. The first stage is characterized by the soul manifesting in a perfect physical body, which is eternal and free from decay (32). Eventually the need for this physical body will pass

¹⁹ The most notable examples of his eschatology are found in *Peri Archon* and his commentaries on John

²⁰ He stresses this in the *Treatise on the First Principle* (Crouzel 241) as well as in Book V of the *Contra Celsum*.

away, and as Origen writes in the *Peri Archon*, "God becomes all in all" (2.3.4). In order for the soul to achieve this union, it must become incorporeal. Perhaps predicting the future objections to this concept, Origen stresses that this union does not result in the destruction of the individual personality; instead, it represents the return of the soul to its original form and to its greatest sense of perfection. Because of Origen's influence, the idea of unification with God becomes a much-debated issue within medieval theology. Scholars such as Saint Cyril of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa stress that the ultimate fate of a soul is "deification," a personal oneness with Christ (Williams 30). The Pseudo-Dionysius hammers home this idea in his striking metaphor that imagines the heavenly assembly as consisting of individuals who are mirror-images of God. The eighth century work of John Damascene, which "speaks of the union with Christ (in this life) and vision (in the next)" and "the union of body and blood now being an antitype of the later mental participation through vision," was especially influential in establishing the idea of a future intimate participation with God, both in the East and the West (34).

In the mysticism of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Origen's ideas develop into a third image of the destination of the soul in "direct relations with the Absolute" (Underhill 167). Monica Furlong explains that the primary goal of the movement was "a discovery of the unitive way, a journey that brings [contemplatives] into a sense of oneness with God" (1-2). This journey consists of a lifelong process of purging themselves of whatever human vice, or sometimes even needs, that block their souls

progress to God.²¹ Through the practice of meditations and contemplation, they would arrive at their final destination: a union of their soul with God (2). In this scheme, God represents not only deity but also destination as the elect looks forward to a mystical union with God, often coming to dwell within his person. Hadewijch of Brabant beautifully articulates this vision when she writes:

May God make known to you, dear child, who he is and how he treats his servants and especially his handmaids, how he consumes them within himself; they possess each other in mutual delight, mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, soul in soul, while a single divine nature flows through them both and they both become one through each other. (109)

As with other schemes of paradise, we find a marked emphasis on the *ōdelightō* of the soul; however, in this image, the individual is lost as it is instead integrated within the body of the creator, the two becoming one in the same way that Christians imagine the sacrament of marriage joining husband and wife. Evelyn Underhill explains this union as a sort of homecoming. If God is, as Augustine suggested, the country of the soul, then *ōthe mystic in the unitive state is living in and of his native land; no exploring alien, but returned exileō* (Underhill 420). Indeed, on those rare occasions in which mystics treat readers to visions of paradise, the ultimate desire of the soul is, as we see in Hadewich, a new life inside of God.

Of course, the preceding outline of heaven's representation is woefully over simplified. Such is the nature of the topic. All theologians and artists have brought their

²¹ Indeed, basic needs were often purged as much as vices. For example, the famed eleventh century mystic Christina eventually died as a result of giving up food. Her story represents the distaste that existed for the physical body and its appetites as well as the lengths some would go through in order to remove impediments to their progress towards God.

own ideas with them as they wrote about paradise, and an examination of the history of heaven is beyond the scope of this dissertation. As noted previously, this argument seeks to focus on medieval representations of heaven, especially those that achieved popularity in England during the later Middle Ages. Using this scheme, three images dominate the literary landscape: the terrestrial paradise, the celestial city, and the union within God. We might well ask ourselves whether examining the narrative function of these representations is even useful, for were these authors not simply working from with the images provided by their cultural traditions? However, the development of representations of paradise within literary texts is important for precisely that reason. Because these images are products of the culture and are charged with such significance, the way that the author chooses to employ them cannot help but play an important narrative role within the text. Ultimately, these representations reinforce a worldview in which certain social practices and beliefs are reaffirmed while those which endanger those practices are reviled.

CHAPTER III

THE LAND ON THE MARGINS: BRENDAN'S VOYAGE TO PARADISE IN THE *SOUTH ENGLISH LEGENDARY*

In 484 A.D., a man was born in the westernmost reaches of Ireland whose adventures would excite the medieval imagination. His name was Brendan and through his journeys, some of which are preserved on medieval and early modern maps, he earned the name "the Navigator." The stories of his travels lived on after his death, and the details of his life, like those of many of the great men and women of his age, became mixed with legend. What seems certain is that as his family's oldest son he entered the monastery at a young age. Popular legends assert that his two great loves were seafaring and Christian evangelism and that he adventured throughout the British Isles, visiting important sites and establishing monasteries. However, he is most famous for his journeys out into the Atlantic Ocean, and these are the voyages that secured his fame. In recent years, as interest in pre-Columbian exploration to the Americas has increased, many scholars have tried to recreate these expeditions, finding in the stories of his travels clues to the locations he explored.²² While some believe that he reached Newfoundland, New England, or even Mexico, others take a more conservative view, suggesting that he ventured only as far as the Outer Hebrides. William F. McNeil claims that Brendan made

²² Geoffery Ashe's *Land to the West* represents a very early attempt to match the legends of Saint Brendan's journey to geographic locations in and along the way to the Americas. Later works by writers such as William F. McNeil and Farley Mowat seem to take the argument that Brendan adventured far out into the Atlantic as irrefutable fact. These works demonstrate the way in which scholarship of the historical voyages has developed over the years.

three trips into the Atlantic with the second of these being his most ambitious, beginning in perhaps 555. McNeil believes this was the expedition that inspired the stories and legends of his adventures into uncharted waters (104-8). Regardless of how far Brendan actually travelled, the literary works that he inspired were immensely popular throughout Europe. Stories of Brendan's journeys exist in dozens of medieval languages and the most famous version, the *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*, survives in over one hundred manuscripts (Barron 13). Although scouring the text for evidence of a historical voyage remains one of the most popular critical exercises for scholars of the Brendan stories, traditions of reading Brendan's tale as a religious allegory or as an examination of spiritual truths exist as well.²³ Indeed, the legends' insistence that paradise was Brendan's ultimate destination suggests a religious application for the narrative, and many studies into the text's spiritual dimensions have focused on monastic life. However, tracing the allegorical ramifications of the Brendan story preserved in the *South English Legendary* in this way is problematic, for it differs in several meaningful ways from its more famous sources. Ultimately, the *SEL* excises much of the most overtly monastic elements, leaving behind a text much more focused on Brendan's pilgrimage-like experiences than upon issues of monastic life, an idea supported by the narrative function that paradise plays within the tale.

The *South English Legendary* is but one of a number of extant accounts of Brendan's journeys, and because so many versions of the story exist, questions regarding source material and genre surround the tales. At various times, scholars have described

²³ For discussions of spiritual themes in stories of Brendan's voyage, see the introduction to Barron and Burgess's text.

The Voyage of Saint Brendan as *exemplum*, saint's life, or *immram*. Certainly, it is commonly grouped with dream visions and for good reason. After all, in its focus on the fantastic and the otherworldly, it has much in common with the narratives of dreamers and visionaries. However, while the text certainly has similarities to such literature, it never suggests that Brendan's ordeal is anything but real. Instead, the tale presents his travels as a point of historical fact. At no point does it describe Brendan as taking leave from his physical senses. His story is firmly rooted on earth. *The Voyage* depicts his journeys as a pilgrimage, an attempt to visit places of religious significance and to use those experiences to gain a greater understanding of God's nature and to claim spiritual rewards. In this respect, the story seems to most closely mimic the genre known as saint's life, and if this classification is accurate, readers should expect it to examine the nature and source of Brendan's holiness.

Some critical debate exists as to the source used by the author of the *SEL*. The most influential stories of Brendan's adventures come from two important Latin versions, the *Vita Brendani* and *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*, and one Anglo-Norman adaptation by Benedeit. In addition, it is widely believed that these two Latin accounts share an early Irish source (or perhaps sources), most likely in the form of the travel and adventure tales so popular in early Irish literature (Strijbosch 2). The *Vita* has much in common with the saint's life, and it attempts to cover Brendan's entire religious career. Likewise, the poetic Anglo-Norman version displays conventions commonly attributed to the saint's life. However, Simon Livery's detailed comparison of the three candidates suggests that the *Navigatio* is the most likely source for the *SEL*. In contrast to the two

saint's lives, the *Navigatio* focuses on only one aspect of Brendan's life, his voyage to the Promised Land of the Saints. Of course, this is the story for which Brendan is most famous, thus it comes as no surprise that of the three, the *Navigatio* seems to have been the more widely distributed, the best known, and the most copied. Like many early medieval manuscripts dating the texts is a difficult exercise. Of the two Latin versions, Barron and Burgess suggest that the *Navigatio* is the older, perhaps existing as early as the ninth century (2), and most scholars believe that it is primarily from the *Navigatio* that later writers, including the author of the *SEL*, developed their own translations and adaptations, many in vernacular languages.

Of the three known Middle English versions of Brendan's voyage, the *SEL* is the oldest. This text, which dates from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, focuses on the lives of a number of important saints, one of whom is Brendan. Certainly, the author of the *SEL* closely follows the frame established in the *Navigatio*. However, it would be a mistake to describe the *SEL* as a mere abridgment, as some suggest, of its more famous ancestor. While it is true that the *SEL* includes many of the same episodes as the *Navigatio* and while it makes few meaningful additions to its source material, its author does frequently adapt the narrative, both in regards to plot and style. The *SEL* typically seeks to simplify the original story, most often by cutting scenes or by shortening exposition. The net effect of these changes is to focus the theme more broadly. Where the *Navigatio* focuses on monastic issues that would interest a relatively limited audience, the *SEL* seeks to appeal more widely. Condensing the stories and cutting those episodes most obviously focused on monks is the author's primary vehicle for making the

tale more accessible. However, in its depiction of paradise, the *SEL* deviates from this pattern. Instead, as it seeks to describe the physical space of the island, the text expands upon the *Navigatio*'s own limited account. In developing a much more detailed image of the paradisaal space, the text draws attention away from issues of monasticism, focusing instead on the newly discovered place and through it the pilgrimage experience that led Brendan there. Although some critics argue that the author is merely adjusting the narrative to fit a secular audience, I believe that it is a mistake to deny the artistic achievement of the tale, for these changes not only appeal to a wider audience stylistically but also thematically. I argue that the changes found in the *SEL* serve to assert the value of the pilgrimage experience, a subject of widespread interest in the fourteenth century, and, as is often the case, the ultimate expression of this theme is found in the text's depiction of paradise.

Certainly, the *South English Legendary Voyage of Saint Brendan* opens in much the same way as the *Navigatio*. A pious saint from Ireland encounters, by our Lordes wille, an abbot by the name of Barynt. Barynt has just returned from a difficult journey across the ocean with his godson Mernoc. With God's help, the two of them made their way to an extraordinarily beautiful island and spent some time exploring it. Barynt's description of this place enthralls Brendan, for it is a land of great delight, with flowers and fruits of all kinds. Indeed, even the stones on the ground are gems, indicative of the special nature of this space. After exploring these wonders, the group is met by a man of great beauty. He greets the travelers, saying:

ȝe aȝte Ihesu Crist thonky wel with riȝte,
 That sceweth of its priuete ȝou so much, and of is miȝte.
 This is that lond that he would ȝut ar the worlds ende,
 His dernelynges an erbe ȝyue and hiter hi scholleth wende. (53-56)

Barynt and his companion have located the famed *Terra Repomissionis Sanctorum*, the earthly paradise promised to faithful believers. Teresa Carp suggests the descriptions of the island and the travelers' difficult voyage have much in common with the genres of folklore known as *echtrae* and *immram*.²⁴ In an attempt to illustrate some spiritual truth, such works focus on the trials and tribulations of heroes who travel into the wilderness. While the two styles of literature are similar in content and theme, their execution is very different. In the *echtrae*, the narrative centers on the otherworldly goal of the journey; the destination is much more important thematically than the adventure. On the other hand, the *immram* focus much more on the voyage itself, emphasizing the characteristics necessary to achieve the ultimate goal (Bray 3). Stylistically, the story of Brendan's exploits seems to be more closely linked to the *immram* as the narrative stresses the trials and tribulations suffered by the travelers during their years on the ocean. Indeed, the saint's voyage to the *Terra Repomissionis Sanctorum* serves to illustrate certain spiritual lessons, and his eventual exploration of the island demonstrates that while the destination is delightful, the difficulties that he experiences along the way are a necessary part of his spiritual preparation. That is to say, without the journey he would not have been able to enjoy the waiting reward. Ultimately, both Barynt and Brendan recognize their privilege

²⁴ Connecting the *Navigatio* to folkloric traditions, especially the *imramum*, has become a ubiquitous part of discussions of the text. However, Teresa Carp's exploration of the sources details the surprising degree of influence that folkloric genres had upon the Latin text.

in visiting this place and stress that God restricts access only to those faithful few who have earned entrance.

The various boundaries that divide the island emphasize the privileged nature of this space. As Barynt and his godson explore, they eventually discover their first obstacle, an impassable river. As they look across at the land beyond this divide, their guide explains more about the nature of this place:

This is Godes priue stude	and thoru hum is this lig
Theruore it worth euer her day	and neuer nyȝt
ȝif mon aȝen Godes heste	nadde nothing mysdo
Hereinne he hadde ȝut bileue aȝen ȝe mote fare	
Thei it thence gou lute wule	ȝe habbe ibe her ȝare. (64-68)

The parallels between the island and Eden are striking. The description of the landscape and the voyage that the pair just completed leaves no doubt that it is terrestrially located; however, unlike the world through which Brendan sails, this place retains a close connection to God. The narrator later explains that this is a sacred land that God prepared for humanity, and as such, it mirrors Eden, the original divinely ordained human space. In this way, it represents earth as it would have been had sin not disrupted God's plan. Were it not for sin, all of humanity would have dwelt in such bliss, but as part of the Fall, Eden's inhabitants were exiled from it. Likewise, access to the Blessed Isle is restricted. Barynt and Mernoc's piety and their suffering on the sea earn them only a glimpse of this place, and the river will allow them to venture only so far. Still, a glance into this sacred space is a privilege far beyond what most of humankind will ever receive. Just as the dreamer finds himself cut off from the maiden and God's city in *Pearl*, the river here

clearly divides the space of humanity from God's sacred space, and the guide stresses that only God's ödernelyngesö will be allowed entry into this is a privileged space (55).

The river is not the only boundary that protects paradise from the unworthy, for the entire island is also ringed by a thick bank of fog. When Brendan and his monks make their own approach to the island, they find a öwel derk mystö that completely obscures their vision (685). Their guide reveals that this mist is a sign that they are approaching the island, and he calls on them to celebrate it. Indeed, as the group penetrates this obstacle, they finally set their eyes upon the goal of their adventure. The guide explains that their ability to pass through this barrier is proof of God's approval and is a reward for their faithfulness. He says, öLo, í her is that lond that ge habbeth isoȝt wide, / And longe, uor our Lorde wolde that ge longe scholde abideö (706-7). Like Barynt, Brendan is denied full access into paradise, for once through the fog, he also comes to the river boundary.²⁵ From his side of the waterway, Brendan can see paradise and share in the revelation of God's plan for the world, but he cannot enter the sacred space. In many ways, the experiences of Brendan and Barynt mimics that of later heavenly experiences such as the one found in *Pearl*. While death is the dividing line in *Pearl*, access to the Promised Land seems to await the final judgment. In neither poem are the narrators truly invited to become full participants in the heavenly experience. Instead, they can merely look and report, as Barynt reports his experiences to Brendan and the narrator reports Brendan's experiences to the readers. However, Brendan's experiences on the ocean provide the text

²⁵ J.S. Mackley suggests that their inability to fully experience Paradise may be part of the larger theological message of the text. God has allowed his followers this special knowledge, but they are still of this world and as such cannot be given full access to Paradise.

the opportunity to explore a number of religious truths, truths reinforced by his eventual discovery of paradise and the nature of the sacred space.

It is important to note that for Barynt, and Brendan who follows after him, paradise is a physical location that exists off the edge of the known world. The question of what the world was like beyond the borders of the maps has always fascinated humanity. Ancient myths and legends are rife with stories of mysterious places and monsters, both of which lurk just outside of that which is known. In *Gilgamesh*, the land surrounding Uruk is a vast forest inhabited by the fearsome giant Humbaba, and it is a place from which no one returns. In the same way, the inhabitants of medieval Europe allowed their imaginations to fill in those areas of the map about which they had no knowledge. The Hereford Map from the early fourteenth century illustrates the mindset of medieval cartographers.²⁶ This map shows the connection that the cartographers saw between the earthly spaces of humanity and the spiritual spaces of God. Adorning the top of the map is a scene of the Last Judgment, depicting the souls of the elect ascending up the left side of the map into heaven and the souls of the damned descending down the right side into hell. Because the scene dominates the apex of the map, it perhaps suggests that whatever happens on the world mapped below has consequences which transcend its boundaries. The holy city of Jerusalem dominates the middle of the map, the cartographers having chosen as the center of human existence the locus of God's kingdom. These features suggest a world that is intimately connected to the things of God. However, the margins of the map reveal places and creatures that are an affront to

²⁶ The descriptions of Medieval maps that follow are drawn from the many images of the maps found in P.D.A. Harvey's *The Hereford World Map: Medieval World Maps and their Context*.

the order of God's kingdom. To the south and along the fringes of the map are gruesome people and monsters, a reminder that once travelers leave the boundaries of the known world they risk falling prey to the evils that lurk in the unknown places. The annotations on the map make clear the danger that these creatures represent. Describing the inhabitants around Gog and Magog in the eastern section of the map, the cartographer writes:

[Here are found] all horrors, greater than it is possible to believe. Intolerable cold, wind always from the mountains! Here are exceedingly ferocious men, feeding on human flesh, drinking gore; foul sons of Cain. They were imprisoned by the Lord through Alexander the Great, within the prince's sight the earth moved, mountains fell down on top of mountains in a circle around them. Where mountains were lacking, he encircled them with an indestructible wall. (quoted Mittman 56)

Certainly, these descriptions indicate a great fear of the unknown and of unknown peoples and their practices. However, these medieval maps also suggest a people whose religious belief informs their understanding of the world around them, and one of the places where the boundaries between religion and geography blur most often is in the depiction of paradise and the Garden of Eden.

Because medieval maps are productions of their makers' beliefs and prejudices, it should come as no surprise that paradise was a common feature on their maps. The Saint-Sever Beatus map from the mid eleventh-century shows paradise in the easternmost portion of the map (the top), cut off from the rest of the world by an impassable boundary. On the Herford Map, paradise is again found in the east. In this example, it is again isolated from the world, this time by a band of water. Interestingly, this map seems

to employ a protected pathway to connect it to the scene of heaven which dominates the top portion of the map. A third example can be found in the fifteenth-century map of Hans Rust. Once again, we find paradise prominently featured as part of the world's geography. In this case, it dominates the top of the map (again representing its placement in the east). This time, it is imagined as a walled fortress from which four rivers issue forth. These rivers serve as the source of all of the world's waters, giving this space special importance as the source of life. Each of these examples demonstrates that in popular medieval thinking, an earthly paradise existed, and its location, although guarded by both monsters and God's will, is both vitally important in the context of the world and possibly accessible under the correct conditions. In addition, these maps indicate the special connection between the celestial world and the physical space of paradise. It is a location separate from heaven yet still connected, and because of this, it serves as an earthly reflection of spiritual ideas such as perfection and purity. Finally, these maps classify the world in relation to three spaces: the earth, the earthly paradise, and the celestial paradise of heaven. Under this system, the earthly paradise is "an intermediate region that lay between the corporeal world and immortal eternity" (Scafi 182). It is the conduit between the earth and the celestial world, a location wherein a human being could experience divine perfection, and in *The Voyage of Saint Brendan*, we find one description of a man's pilgrimage to this sacred space.

Popular religion supported the cartographers' insistence that paradise was part of earth's geography. The prevailing thinking among late Classical and medieval theologians was that the Garden of Eden was a physical location that remained a part of

the temporal world. In beginning his *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine provides an overview of the three most common understandings of the biblical accounts of the earthly paradise. He explains that many believe that it should be understood completely in the òcorporealö sense while others believe that it should be understood as purely òspiritualö in nature (32). However, he identifies a third camp, with whom he identifies, that interprets paradise as having both spiritual and corporeal connotations. Certainly, Augustine makes his support of the third position clear, heaping much scorn upon those who argue that paradise is a purely spiritual place. He stresses several times in this text that Eden is properly understood as the physical location in which God placed Adam. However, he goes on to suggest that there may in fact be multiple paradises on earth. He also hints at a metaphoric understanding of the concept, explaining that it can also be understood as any place where the soul is happy and free of the temptations of sin. Under this abstract system, even the church becomes a type of paradise. In this way, Augustine asserts that paradise exists both physically and metaphorically as he argues that it is at the same time a physical location on earth that was specially prepared by God for Adam as well as a spiritual ideal, a place wherein humanity can exist without the pressures of sin and temptation.

This sometimes uncomfortable, and seemingly contradictory, balance of literal and metaphorical interpretations of paradise is also found in the writings of Saint Ambrose, the fourth century Bishop of Milan. Ambrose's writings reveal some of the difficulties inherent in discussing paradise as a physical location. Indeed, before beginning his homilies on paradise, he notes Paul's insistence that he had knowledge of

paradise that he was forbidden to share. Ambrose sees this as indicative of the dangerous nature of the topic and writes, "The subject of paradise should not í be treated lightly" (288). His writings also reveal the way in which literal interpretations of *Genesis*'s symbolic aspects complicate investigation into the topic. He seems to favor a metaphorical understanding of Eden. At one point, he writes, "Paradise is therefore a land of fertility ó that is to say, a soul which is fertile ó planted in Eden that is a certain delightful or well-tilled land in which the soul finds pleasure" (294). Indeed, he goes on to discuss the allegorical significance of each of the four rivers, connecting them with such biblical events as Moses' exodus from Egypt. As metaphorical as Ambrose's explications are, he is not willing to let go of the notion that paradise is a physical location on earth. He writes, "Paradise, a land watered by many rivers, is then appropriately situated in the East and not in the regions facing it" (301). Like Augustine, Ambrose seems to prefer a metaphysical interpretation of paradise while at the same time remaining unwilling to deny its physical dimensions. Still, he provides only a vague notion of its actual location. Later theologians, such as Isidore, are more willing to provide explicit details regarding its position, illustrating how pervasive the idea of an earthly paradise became. He writes:

Paradise is a place lying in the parts of the Orient, whose name is translated out of the Greek into Latin as *hortus*. In the Hebrew it is called Eden, which in our tongue means delight. And the two being joined mean garden of delight; for it is planted with every kind of wood and fruit bearing tree, having also the tree of life; there is neither cold nor heat there, but continual spring temperature. (quoted Magasich-Airola 19)

Here, we see paradise described in a purely physical way. The metaphors and allegories of Augustine and Ambrose have disappeared. Stripped away from the symbolism of *Genesis*, the earthly paradise evolves into a space to be explored, and we find as medieval culture becomes concerned with understanding and mapping the world that these interests include paradise.

The concept of an earthly paradise developed throughout the medieval period and eventually coalesced into the concept of *Terra Repomissionis Sanctorum* (The Promised Land of the Saints). Perhaps influenced by literal readings of *Revelation* and the *Visio Pauli*, medieval writers describe a land that God has prepared for his chosen people. The *Visio Pauli*, placed by most scholars in the mid-third century, describes this place: "And I looked around the land, and I saw a river flowing with milk and honey, and there were trees planted by the bank of that river, full of fruit" (292). Here again, we see the imagery of river, light, and fruit that are so common in medieval images of the earthly paradise. Just as in the story of Brendan's voyage, the narrator stresses that the place he visits has a connection to earthly geography:

When he had ceased speaking to me, he led me outside the city through the midst of the trees¹ and put me across the river of milk and honey; and after that he led me over the ocean which supports the foundations of heaven¹ and I saw the beginning of heaven founded on a great river of water, and I asked, "What is this river of water?" And he said to me, "This is the ocean which surrounds the earth." And when I was at the outer limit of the ocean I looked, and there was no light in that place, but darkness and sorrow and sadness; and I sighed. (293)

Here we see the stark contrast between the sacred space of paradise, which God has granted Paul entrance to, and the mundane space of humanity. The contrast between the

good things of Heaven and the darkness and sorrow of the earthly space beyond the boundary evokes an emotional response from Paul, and as Paul meets the various spirits, some damned and some blessed, we come to understand the exclusivity of the sacred space.

Certainly, such depictions of an earthly paradise were quite common, and the widespread popularity of this idea is suggested by the thirteenth-century poem *The Land of Cokayne*. This poem uses the imagery of *Terra Repomissionis Sanctorum* in its parody of monastic living.²⁷ Although the text is clearly mocking in its tone, it does demonstrate how certain ideas about the Promised Land of the Saints, which the *Navigatio* clearly draws upon, had become standardized by the late medieval period. Drawing heavily from longstanding traditions, the text sets the physical location of this place:

Fur in see bi west Spaygne
Is a lond i-hote Cokaygne
Ther nis lond under heven riche
Of wel, of godnis hit i-liche. (1-4)

Just as in the maps described above, the text places the island just off the edge of the known world. It also stresses that this is a locale that is within reach of those dedicated to finding it and that accessing this paradise requires special election. Indeed, the text playfully suggests the rigorous ordeal that will precede admittance to the island:

Whoso wol com that lond to,
Ful grete penance he mot do:

²⁷ Dunn and Byrnes suggest that the writer is a Franciscan monk who seeks to satirize the Cistercian monks of Kildare (188). Emily Yoder calls the target of the satire into question, arguing that its intended target is the *Navigatio* itself.

Seve yere in swineis dritte
He mote wade, wol ye i-witte
Al anon up to the chynne,
So schal the lond winne.
Lordinges gode and hend
Mot ye never of world wend,
Fort ye stond to yure cheance
And fulfille that penance. (177-86)

As the text parodies the idea of pilgrimage and religious life, it also demonstrates how intertwined paradise had become with the ideas of trials, penance, and election.

Embedded in the idea of *Terra Repomissionis Sanctorum* is a certain amount of exclusivity. The land is so far away from the world of human beings that successfully completing the journey requires God's favor. Brendan, before undertaking his own voyage, refuses to set out until he has prayed for God's guidance. In addition, only those who have devoted themselves to a spiritual life are allowed access to the island, and the expedition becomes an important part of the travelers' spiritual development and penitential preparation for entry into paradise. Indeed, the late-coming travelers in the *Navigatio* demonstrate the dangers involved for those of insufficient faith or for those who remain under sin's power. The *SEL* communicates this theme through the fate of the monk who is dragged screaming into hell. As the man disappears into the flames, the text reminds its readers that "ðhim failede grace, hou so it was, is lif vorto amendeö (511). Despite these obstacles, it seems clear that the idea of a physical paradise existing somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean was a widely accepted belief in the mid to late Middle Ages, and the concept even affected the medieval perception of geography. In *The*

Voyage of Saint Brendan, we find one description of a man's pilgrimage to this sacred space.

As Brendan prepares to undertake his voyage, the *SEL*'s constant refrain is that this is 'our Lordes wille' (5). The text opens by describing Brendan as a monk who has lived his life in accordance with God's will, a man who had partaken 'of vastynge and penaunce inou' (3). The nature of Brendan's character is important because his success in pursuing the Blessed Island depends more upon his character than his navigational skills. For this reason, the text constantly reaffirms Brendan's piety. He is not a hero who stumbles across adventure or who achieves greatness through his own force of will. Instead, he pursues his journey as an act of worship. As Brendan explains it, he wishes to 'seche that lond of biheste ȝif God wolde ous thuder lede' (87). Certainly he refuses to leave until he reflects upon whether this journey is indeed God's will. Once at sea, Brendan consistently turns control of the expedition over to God. During the first league, the narrator explains that 'him wende this holi mon wuder our Lord him sende' (105). As his expedition moves towards the Island of Birds, the narrator again focuses on God's role in guiding the voyage: 'Hor scip, thoru our Lordes grace, thuderward euene drouȝ' (156). Even after his success in discovering the Blessed Island, the text still stresses God's control over the expedition: 'And wende hamward in the se, as our Lord hem sende / And wel sonere come home then hi outward wende' (724). Certainly, the story of a group of men relying on God to lead them through dangerous waters in search of an ultimate reward resonates with spiritual significance, and Brendan's constant refrain that he must seek God's will illustrates the religious nature of the journey. For Brendan, the

journey is a pilgrimage to the most sacred of sites, and the end, the text makes clear that his sacrifices win him a momentous reward:

This holi mon Seyn Brendan	sone to dethe droug
Vor neuereft after thulke tyme	of the world he ne roȝte,
Bote as a man in another world,	and as he wre in thoȝteí
Now Gode ous bringe to thulke ioie	as is soule wende to. (727-33)

As the narrative draws to a close, Brendan is a changed man. Although he returns to the mundane world of humanity, his focus is now completely upon spiritual matters. In a sense, he has given up his citizenship in the temporal world in order to become part of God's kingdom. As we see in the lines above, this devotion will ultimately translate into permanent residency in paradise. Like Moses who was only granted a glimpse of Canaan, Brendan was not able to fully experience the Blessed Island; however, the journey provides him insight into spiritual truths and suggests the power of the experience of pilgrimage.

Certainly, the similarities between this tale and the stories of Christian pilgrimage might explain its popularity. The stories of travelers adventuring forth in search of paradise struck a chord with medieval Christian readers. The idea of pilgrimage resonated in the culture, and representations of the experience often found their way into medieval art and literature. During the Middle Ages, these expeditions represented more than a simple trip abroad. Instead, they were spiritual journeys, taken, as Georgia Frank explains, for the purpose of gaining some tangible reward (826). Some travelers expected this reward to be material in nature, imagining such prizes as healing or visions, while

others simply expected deeper understanding of God's mysteries. Whatever their reasons for undertaking such an enterprise, an understanding of the allegorical significance of these journeys existed. Augustine explores these dimensions in a passage on scriptural interpretation found in *On Christian Doctrine*. He writes:

Such is the picture of our condition in this life of mortality. We have wandered far from God; and if we wish to return to our father's home, this world must be used, not enjoyed, that so the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made – that is, that by means of what is material and temporary we may hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal (523).

In *City of God*, Augustine also asserts that Christians are to use the material for the spiritual benefit, and he introduces his thesis that Christians are pilgrims in a world to which they do not belong. This idea developed further in the writings of early theologians. Columbanus, for example, uses metaphors of travel to explain the Christian experience. He uses the image of a ship piloted by Christ through treacherous waters to demonstrate how the faithful can navigate the dangers of life (qtd. in Bray 2). In his examination of the pilgrimage in literature, Zacher suggests that these journeys often serve as an allegory for the Christian existence. He writes, "Every literal pilgrimage imitated the lifelong pilgrimage of all men" (43). Dias explains that in addition to the spiritual knowledge gained through the journey, the pilgrim also faced both "moral" and "physical" dangers (138). As Augustine explained, it was very easy for the Christian pilgrims to become enraptured by the world, thereby risking their souls. The dangers of pilgrimages were very real. These expeditions often took travelers to the edges of the maps, and rumors of imprisonment and death abounded. Certainly, the hazards that

Brendan and his crew face, griffons, sea monsters, and even the fires of hell, mirror the difficulties that medieval travelers faced. The allegory of the pilgrimage incorporates these ideas, and artistic representations of such journeys often stress humanity's need to place trust in God's guidance. With the metaphor of the pilgrimage being so popular in religious sermons and writings, it should come as no surprise that the image makes its way into more literary texts, and quite often, literary representations of pilgrimages serve as allegories for religious truths.

Certainly, the idea that the *Navigatio* has an allegorical meaning has almost become an accepted fact, and because the text puts such stress on issues surrounding monks, modern readers most often understand it in relation to monastic teachings. Such readings of the *Navigatio* raise questions regarding the purpose of the *SEL* version of the text. If, as some would argue, it is merely an abbreviated copy of the *Navigatio*, we would expect to see the monastic themes of the tale to be preserved. However, if the omissions made by the English poet are focused and have narrative significance, it would suggest that the *SEL* has themes and concerns distinct from its source. Dorothy Ann Bray summarizes the allegorical reading of the *Navigatio*: "The familiar metaphor of the ocean voyage as a voyage through life is intricately bound to monastic existence, revealing lessons concerning faith in God, avoidance of sins, and obedience to the monastic rule, as Saint Brendan's monks learned by trusting their tiny craft to God and their saint" (1). She goes on to connect the story found in the *Navigatio* with the "Irish practice of *peregrination pro amore Dei*, the aspiration of Irish monks to leave home and embark on pilgrimage wherever God may choose to send them" (2). Because the Irish of the early

medieval period were such prolific sailors, these journeys often took place on the waves, and the historical accounts of Brendan suggest that he made frequent pilgrimages by sea to sites and people of interest. Other scholars also see the influence of Irish monasticism upon the *SEL*'s Latin source. Cynthia Bourgeault explains, "The *Navigatio* is by all estimates monastic to the core" (111). In his own exploration of issues of authorship, James Carney minces no words: "The author of the *Navigatio* belonged to a monastery and every sentence, every character, and every incident reflects Irish monastic society and ideals" (41). While some critics, such as Michael Zelzer, who argues that the text primarily focuses on issues surrounding Benedictine monasticism, dispute the supposed Irish focus of the narrative, the fact that the text focuses on issues of monastic life has become almost beyond question.

However, the *SEL* version of the text is far removed from the early Irish monasteries, and examination of the changes that the English author makes to the source reveals the omission of many of the scenes that are of the most importance to scholars who stress connections to Irish monasticism. The authors of the *SEL* were most likely the inhabitants of English abbeys in the south-west Midlands, and they were crafting reading material not for a monastic audience but instead for the regional aristocracy or secular clergy.²⁸ We might therefore imagine that more overt references to Irish monasticism may have been less appealing to these audiences than the core pilgrimage tale. Indeed, the author of the *SEL* text does make several changes to the overall structure of the story, and some of these strike memorable and meaningful passages, leading readers to question

²⁸ Barron deals with issues of the *SEL*'s audience in the introduction to his translation of the text.

the reasons for the changes. The chart below details the basic plot structure of the two texts:

Table 1: Narrative Differences between the *Navigatio* and *SEL*

<i>Navigatio Sancti Brendani</i>	<i>South English Legendary</i>
I. The Meeting with Mernoc	The Meeting with Mernoc
II. Brendan Asks for God's Blessing	Brendan Asks for God's Blessing
III. Brendan Journey's to Enda	
IV. The Monks Construct the Ship	The Monks Construct the Ship
V. The Late-Arriving Monks Appear	
VI. The Island of the Dog	The Island of the Dog
VII. The First Late-Arriving Monk Dies	
VIII. The Group is Resupplied	
IX. The Celebration of Holy Days	The Land of the Sheep (Little is Mentioned of Holy Days).
X. The Fish That is an Island	The Fish That is an Island
XI. The Island of Birds	The Island of Birds
XII. The Island of the Monastery	The Island of the Monastery
XIII. The Island of Dangerous Sustenance	
XIV. God Directs the Boat	
XV. Return to the Holiday Islands	Return to the Holiday Islands
XVI. The Sea Monster	The Sea Monster
XVII. The Island of the Choir	
XVIII. The Island of Large Fruit	The Birds Bring Grapes
XIX. The Gryphon	The Gryphon
XX. Return to the Holiday Islands	Return to the Holiday Islands
XXI. The Clear Sea	The Clear Sea
XII. The Crystal Pillar	
XXIII. Hell	Hell
XXIV. The Second Late Monk is Lost to Hell	An Unknown Monk is Lost to Hell
XXV. Judas	Judas
XXVI. Paul the Hermit	Paul the Hermit
XXVII. Paradise	Paradise
XXIX. Conclusion	Conclusion

While the above list cannot hope to show the more nuanced changes that the *SEL* makes to its source, it does reveal major points of divergence. Certainly, the two works follow the same general outline, and the *SEL* leaves the order of the major scenes unchanged.

However, the author of the *SEL* version of the tale chooses to make several omissions, including the elimination (or perhaps more accurately, modification) of the important sub-plot of the late-arriving monks. Most, if not all, of these changes weaken the connection between the tale and Irish monasticism. One such casualty is the crystal pillar of section XXII. Mackley explains that this difficult symbol draws upon both ðimages of the Otherworld from Irish mythologyö as well Gaelic Christian imagery from the *Baudoin de Sebourc* (184-86).²⁹ The omission of the visit to Saint Enda is another telling choice on the part of the English author. The historical Enda was an important Irish saint, who lived and worked in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. He is legendary for his influence on Irish monastic life, and he is often credited with establishing the first true monastery on Irish soil. Certainly, Brendan's decision in the *Navigatio* to begin his pilgrimage by visiting Saint Enda connects his voyage to Irish monasticism, and in omitting this scene, the English poet blurs this association. In the same way, the deletion of the ðIsland of the Three Choirsö seems to excise connections to Irish traditions. Here again, Mackley is useful, and he connects this scene to three noteworthy Irish sources: the three orders of saints detailed by Saint Patrick, the Island of Laughter common to the *immrama*, and the Island of Happiness in the *Mael Duin* (167).

²⁹ The title character of the *Baudoin* encounters a Crystal Church wherein he meets Elijah and Enoch, the two Biblical figures that God chooses to take to heaven before their death. Mackley argues that Irish readers would have connected this imagery to Brendan, who like Elijah and Enoch, will ultimately get a glimpse of paradise before death.

While it is true that other scenes in the text have been connected to the *immrama* or Irish monasticism, the fact that the few scenes that the poet removes in their entirety are so closely tied to Irish tradition suggests a purpose to the deletions, forcing readers to consider the purpose of what the poet left behind.

The text crafted by the *SEL* poet is a much more focused narrative. Indeed, the text is so streamlined that readers might ask if the poet's primary motivation for modifying it was brevity rather than theme. As discussed above, the major changes in the text suggest a shift away from the tale's Irish traditions and its focus upon Irish monasticism. In the same way, the smaller changes and compressions that the poet makes throughout the narrative suggest a broader focus that deemphasizes the concerns of monks and centers on the spiritual aspects of the pilgrimage journey. As noted above, three elements of pilgrimages upon which medieval theologians focused were the tangible rewards of the experience, the necessity to, as Augustine said, see the spiritual in the material, and the dangerous nature of the expedition. While each of these issues plays a role in the *Navigatio*, the *SEL*'s compaction of the narrative removes some of the complexities that are required for a satisfying allegorical reading. Instead, the focus is much more on the details of the journey itself. Take as an example the text's description of the expedition's first visit to the Island of Sheep. The *Navigatio* makes its readers constantly aware of the holy days that surround the monk's visit. As they arrive on the island, Brendan pronounces, "Faciamus hic opus divinum. Sacrificemus Deo immaculate

hostiam quia hodie est Cena Dominia.ö³⁰ However, the *SEL* does not even reveal that the group visits the island on any religious holiday until they are preparing to leave, and even then, there is no mention of sacrifice. In the same way, the *SEL* deemphasizes the religious calendar as the monks visit the Island of Birds. It is not until the end of the description that the text deals with Easter, but the holiday never becomes an important part of the scene. Instead, the birds merely mention that Brendan's group will come to this place every Easter, and the narrator's note that this all happened on Easter's day is placed at the end of the scene, more of a footnote than an important narrative detail. This is not so in the *Navigatio*. In addition to the sacrifice on Maundy Tuesday, the text also details a man with bread baked under ashes on Good Friday. Likewise, Easter becomes integral to the visit to the Island of Birds as Brendan himself exclaims, "Ecce Dominus, noster Jhesus Christus nobis dedit locum ad manendum in suam sanctam resurrectionem.ö"³¹ This declaration is accompanied by the description of a clear stream, absent in the *SEL*, and by a more detailed description of the chorus sung by the island's birds.³² In this way, the poet strips away the focus on the liturgical calendar and removes several scenes that develop the monastic allegory. In Cynthia Bourgeault's study of monastic themes in the *Navigatio* the incidents of capitula IX-XI are a key moment in the text, the moment when the liturgical calendar and the expedition of Brendan come together, "infusing" the text with discussion of the Divine Offices (116-118). By stripping away these details, the poet of the *SEL* draws attention away from clerical

³⁰ "Let us carry out the divine service here. Let us sacrifice the Spotless Victim to God, for today is Maundy Thursday.ö"

³¹ "Our Lord Jesus Christ has given us a place in which to stay during his holy Resurrection.ö"

³² The chorus of the birds in the *Navigatio* is glossed by the author of the *SEL* who merely reports that they sang rather than detailing the actual psalms performed.

issues and focuses the readers' attention much more centrally on the experience of the journey, an experience which culminates in Brendan's ultimate visit to the sacred space of paradise.

Another aspect of the *SEL* that emphasizes the pilgrimage experience of Brendan and his crew is the way in which the line between that which is material and that which is spiritual is blurred. One scene in which the text distorts this line is in Brendan's visit to the island of Judas Iscariot. As the expedition approaches a small island, described as nothing more than a rock jutting out of the ocean, they see Judas fastened to the rock. Pelted mercilessly by the sea, his misery is obvious:

Aboue him was a cloth iteid	myd twei tongen vaste
The nether ende tilde to is chynne	oueral the wynd it caste
Bet, as the wynd it bleu,	then wreche amydee the eie.
The wawes bête ek of the se	biuore and bihynde;
Wrecchedore gost then he was	ne dorte nomon fynde. (523-27)

As wretched as the man appears to Brendan and his monks, the text soon reveals that Judas finds these torments a blessing. Indeed, Judas begs Brendan to find a way to allow him to stay on this rock throughout the night lest he be dragged back to hell for greater torture. The poet's detailed description of the suffering brought on by the physical forces of wave and temperature suggests that the most difficult challenges that face humanity on earth are pale reflections of the torments that await those unfortunate enough to find themselves in hell. Furthermore, the few possessions that Judas is allowed to maintain, the cloth which distresses his eyes, the thongs with which he is bound, and the rock upon which he sits are all rewards for the few good deeds he performed while living. While

this sounds paradoxical, Judas describes the spiritual truth behind these material possessions: *ōVewe gode dede ichabbe ido of warm ich mowe telle / Ac non so lute that I ne fynde her other in Helleö (576-77)*. These few material items teach a spiritual lesson about the importance of good works, for they offer some comfort, despite being mixed with torment, for those bound in hell.

The use of material things to learn spiritual truths, an important part of the pilgrimage experience, also manifests in the text's depiction of paradise. As noted above, the boundaries of the place speak to its exclusivity, and by placing the visit to hell in such close proximity to the experience of paradise, the text details the two options available to humanity. Where the passage to hell was easy, with no boundaries blocking entrance therein, the bank of fog blocks access to paradise. Where hell is a rocky mountain that burns with an intense fire and is constantly swept by a brutal wind, paradise is a place of tranquility and light. Indeed, the poet of the *SEL* focuses upon the physical aspects of the Blessed Island much more than does the author of the *Navigatio*. In an unusual reversal of styles, the Latin text glosses over the physical description of the island:

Porro ascendentibus de navi viderunt terram speciosam ac plenam arboribus pomiferis sicut in tempore autumnali. Cum autem circuissent illam terram nulla affuit illis nox. Accipiebant tantum de pomis et de fontibus bibebant. Et ita per XL dies perlustrabant terram et non poterant invenire. Quadam vero die invenerunt flumen magnum vergentem per medium insulae³³

³³ *ō*On disembarking from the boat they saw a wide land full of trees bearing fruit as in autumn time. When they had gone in a circle around that land, night still had not come on them. They took what fruit they wanted and drank from the wells and so for the space of forty days they reconnoitered the whole island and could not find the end of itö (63).

While the text does note that the land is full of fruit bearing trees and that the land is perpetually free of darkness, it moves quickly to the theological discussion between the guide and Brendan. The *SEL*, on the other hand, develops a much more detailed description of the Blessed Island. The poet writes:

Tho hi some out of this derke myst	and myȝte aboute ise,
Vnder the vairest lond hi were	that miȝte an erthe be;
So cler and so liȝt it was	that there was ioie inouȝ.
Then ther were, vol of frut,	wel thicke euerich bouȝ.
Thicke it was biset of tren,	and the tren thicke bere,
The applen were all rioe inouȝ,	riȝt as it heruest were.
Fourti dawes in this lon	aboute hi gonne wende;
Hi ne miȝte fynde in non half	of this lon non ende.
Hit was euermore day,	hi ne founde non nyȝt;
Hi ne wende fynde no stude	so much clerte ne liȝt.
The eir was euer in o stat,	nouthur to hot ne to cold ó
Bote the ioie that hi found	ne may neuer be itold. (688-99)

Clearly the physical description of the island is of much greater importance to the poet of the *SEL*. Here, the fruit and trees are not merely described as being like what someone might find in autumn. Instead, they represent the ðvairestö land that is possible to be found on earth. Likewise, the poet's exposition on the climate of the island contrasts with the visit to hell two scenes before. Where hell is both hot and cold, being heated by the fires of the mountain and cooled by the cruel wind and fierce waves, the climate of paradise is perfect. The contrast between the spiritual rewards of Paradise, which the text declares awaits all people who know God and are ðvnder is Laweö and the spiritual torments of hell are made clear through the physical descriptions of the two scenes (717),

and as Brendan's guide stresses, the monks' pilgrimage to this place reveals these
ōpriuetesö (708).

In addition to detailing the way in which earthly places can reveal spiritual truths, the text also examines the danger of the pilgrimage experience and uses them to emphasize the necessity of trusting God. As the monks journey towards the Blessed Island, they are under almost constant assault. They must deal with quieted sails, hunger and thirst, and even dangerous monsters. However, through these events Brendan constantly reminds his followers that God will see them through these troubles. The attack of the griffin is particularly indicative of this motif. After leaving the Island of Grapes, a griffin comes upon them and attacks their boat with, as the narrator says, the intent to kill them. As happens so frequently in the text, the monks cry out with fear. Indeed, fear seems to be their most common response to the things that they encounter. However, as the monks give up hope of surviving this encounter, one of the tiny birds from the Island of Birds appears and, despite seemingly being mismatched in size and strength, kills the beast. The narrator sees in this an important spiritual lesson, explaining that the ōthing that God wole happe iwust ne shcal nothing asleö (438). This narratorial interjection is absent from the *Navigatio*, which ends its version of the incident with the griffin's tumble into the sea. While Brendan does promise the monks that God will protect them as the griffin approaches, the Latin text never asserts the larger ramifications of the scene. The fear that the journey builds in the monks manifests even in response to encounters that are of no threat to them. For example, the fish-island Joscani, upon whom they rest three times, terrifies them. Angry, perhaps because they did not learn the lesson

of the tiny bird, Brendan chides them saying, *ōWhat is ȝou? Warof beth ȝe adrad? / Vp the maistres rugge of alle fisches ȝe habbeth imad ȝou glad, / And annoueward is rug fur imad and doth fram ȝere to ȝereö* (449-51). Again, the poet uses the visit to paradise in the final scene to contrast the monks' experiences on the journey. Where their reaction to most of their experiences had been fear and terror, as they enter paradise, they are at peace. They enter into the land with great *ōioie,ö* and the poet stresses that the *ōioie* that he founde ne may neuer be itoldö (690; 699). Perhaps most telling is the voyage away from paradise, which seems to be quick, safe, and uneventful. The poet notes that they *ōwel sonere come hom then hi outward wende,ö* and there is no indication that they faced any further danger (725). It seems as if the fantastic sights and terrifying dangers that they encountered on the sea were part of the pilgrimage experience, serving as a tool for the communication of spiritual truths, and once that the pilgrimage ended, the monks returned to the mundane world of humankind unhindered.

One member of the voyage does not fully return to the world of humanity, however. Brendan seems a changed man by the experience. The text suggests that he constantly meditates and appears to the monks as *ōa man in another worldö* (321).³⁴ Certainly, those who undertook pilgrimages expected tangible rewards for their sacrifice, and the *SEL* text stresses the spiritual nature of these rewards. Barynt is also changed by his journey to the Blessed Island. The very nature of his being seems to have been transformed, and the monks recognize upon him a *ōsuote smulö* that reveals his spiritual

³⁴ Here I have chosen to use Barron and Glynø's interpretation of the text rather than the original Middle English.

development. Likewise, the experiences of Paul the Hermit suggest the spiritual rewards that pilgrimages can offer. Discovered by Brendan living alone on a small island, Paul details the events that brought him to his hermitage. He explains that a man came to him and told him that the Lord has prepared a boat which will convey him to a special place. In obedience to this command, Paul entered the boat, content to let the Lord take him wherever He would. He eventually arrived at his island at which point his boat drifted away to sea. These events seemed to herald a disastrous end for his pilgrimage, but an otter soon arrived to give him some fish. When the otter ceased to bring fish, Paul discovered a spring of water sufficient to meet all of his needs. For forty-one years he has dwelt on this island seeking ōour Lordes will to doö (653). His reward for his pilgrimage is the knowledge that God provides for the needs of those who are obedient. While Paul's pilgrimage ended upon his small island, Brendan and his monks receive their reward in their admittance to the *Terra Repomissionis Sanctorum*. However, as the guide prepares them to leave the island, he asserts that journey was just as important as their final destination. He explains, ōher is that lond that ȝe habbeth isoȝt wide, / And longe, uor our Lord wolde that ȝe long scolde abide, / Vor ȝe scholde in this grete se is priuetes iseö (706-8). Here at last is revealed the reason that Brendan's journey had to be so long and dangerous. The mysteries and truths that God revealed during the monks' long voyage were part of the reward, and they could only be exposed as part of the experience. In this way, the text asserts the value of the pilgrimage experience, and its description of the physical space of paradise plays an integral part in affirming this important cultural convention.

CHAPTER IV

"AS HITT HADDE BENE OO VOYCE:ö MECHTILD OF HACKEBORN's HEAVENLY VISION

Another metaphor for the heavenly experience in the literature of the Middle Ages is that of the spiritual union with the Godhead. Found most often in the works of the mystics of the mid to late medieval period, this image typically describes the soul's ultimate reward as being an individual encounter with God. Denise Baker suggests that the popularity of this type of narrative draws its impetus from the "affective spirituality" promoted by contemplative mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux for whom "the temporary union with Christ achieved through meditation prefigures the eternal participation in the deity attained by the blessed" (27). One of the most detailed representations of a soul's ascent through heaven and into oneness with God can be found in Mechthild of Hackeborn's *Booke of Ghostlye Grace*. This text explores a number of visions experienced by the thirteenth-century nun Mechthild, many of which detail close personal encounters with Christ in heaven.³⁵ While the *Booke* originally appeared in Latin in the late thirteenth century, an English translation became very popular in the British Isles in the early to mid-fifteenth century.³⁶ Although Mechthild's work has not

³⁵ Although minor disagreement on the dates of Mechthild's birth and death exist, 1241-1299 is widely accepted.

³⁶ The date of the text's introduction to England is a matter of critical debate. Hope Emily Allen argues that the book had to exist in English before Margery of Kempe recorded her own experiences, perhaps as early as 1414. Theresa Halligan suggests a more conservative date of 1438 (Allen lxvi; *Book of Gostlye Grace* 52). The two texts are very similar in content, with the English version undergoing few substantive changes outside of the obfuscation of pronoun gender.

been as admired among modern audiences as that of her peers, evidence suggests that it enjoyed widespread recognition for several centuries after its creation.³⁷ Centrally located in this narrative is a journey to paradise. However, in contrast to *Brendan's Voyage*, the vision of heaven is not the end point. Instead, it merely serves as a vehicle to assert the importance of a spiritual union with Christ. In constructing this narrative, Mechtild focuses on metaphors of transformation and unity, illustrating in the images of liquid gold, wax seals, marriage, and the mingling of heavenly voices in song the soul's need for unification within the body of God. Ultimately, she escapes the confines of space by transforming into fluid in hopes of achieving her ultimate goal, fusion with the body of Christ. Because of this, Mechtild's paradise is found not within space but by escaping it and becoming one with the divine. In this way, Mechtild's vision of paradise, like those in *Pearl* and *Saint Brendan's Voyage*, uses spatial representations to transfer spiritual and social meaning. Where *Pearl's* paradise focuses on issues of hierarchy and *Brendan's* focuses on pilgrimage, Mechtild's text seems much more concerned with paradise's personal dimension. Indeed, the images that Mechtild presents are highly metaphorical and serve to endorse certain religious practices, most notably the importance of emotion and penance in the soul's quest for God. In this way, *The Booke of Ghostlye Grace* demonstrates the way in which spatial representations can assert and defend earthly ideologies, and for this reason, it serves as an excellent illustration of the narrative function of paradisaal images.

³⁷ For more on the reception of the text, see Mary Jeremy Finnegan's *The Women Scholars of Helfta*. Finnegan notes that the work was very popular amongst the Dominican order, and this group disseminated the book widely (55).

Relatively little is known about Mechtild's personal life, and although her writing enjoyed a robust popularity between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the biographical details of her life remain obscure. Emphasizing our unfortunate lack of knowledge, controversy even surrounds her basic identity, and a few scholars still prefer to connect her with Mechtild of Magdeburg or other influential women of her time.³⁸ What little we know of Mechtild of Hackeborn comes from the *Booke* or through the writings of her acquaintances and mentors. This much seems certain: she is the younger sister of the notable abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn who ran a very successful abbey at Helfta in Saxony. Mechtild was widely regarded for her piety. She suffered from a variety of chronic health problems and had a series of visions in the thirteenth century. Pressured into making them known, she was aided in this process by Gertrude the Great, who had previously been a student of Mechtild's.³⁹ Helfta, the abbey in which Mechtild lived and worked, was a hotbed of scholarly activity, and many of the women who lived there became well known for their writings. Gertrude of Hackeborn had a reputation for holding her charges to high intellectual standards, and German mysticism thrived here (Halligan 34). The women of Helfta were prolific writers, and of them Gertrude the Great, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Mechtild of Hackeborn won widest fame. Taken as a group, the writings of these women were progressive in tenor, emphasizing the personal nature of Christ and suggesting a pastoral role for women often denied by the church

³⁸ Most recent scholars reject the notion that the two women are one and the same; the prevailing attitude, as expressed by Barbara Kline, is that there is no connection between the two women (84). There is further controversy surrounding a Mechtild of Wippa, but she seems to be only a close relative.

³⁹ For biographical details on Mechtild's life, see Halligan's edition of *The Booke* and Bynum's *Jesus as Mother*.

leaders of their day. At times, they had to answer for their writing.⁴⁰ By all accounts, Helfta was a place of dynamic women and dynamic ideals, and from within this fertile ground, Mechtild worked. Ultimately, her *Booke* is a masterpiece of mystic literature, a long and poetic discourse of one woman's spiritual encounters and a guidebook for her vision of a purer spiritual life.

While the *Booke* focuses on some significant events in Mechtild's life, it does not propose to tell the story of her earthly existence. Instead, the book serves as a spiritual biography, offering an account of her visions and detailing her journey into a more personal relationship with Christ. As she begins relating these experiences, she explains that her *Booke* will "eschewes of this maydyns berth, and how sche come to religioun, and off here virtuous lyevynge" (1). Because of this focus, the only parts of her "virtuous lyevynge" that she finds important are those of a spiritual nature; therefore, she provides scant biographical details. Those that she does choose to include are often used to stress the divine mandate of her visions. One such detail is her failing health, and she often introduces new showings with the phrase, "Whene sche was syke" (47). This physical weakness seems to serve several important narrative functions. First, her focus on her failing body adds emphasis to her quest for a new spiritual body within Christ. In addition, Mechtild uses her sickness as a vehicle for spiritual truth, for as a result of the visions, she swears to become "meke and benygne" in "here sykenesse" (47, 610). Indeed, *The Booke* suggests that it was the threat of her failing health that motivated her to agree to catalog her visions.

⁴⁰ Mechtild of Magdeburg in particular seems to have drawn negative attention for her works, and she was at one point counseled to destroy some of her writings.

Although initially aghast that her secret experiences with Christ would be recorded, Mechtild eventually became convinced that God approved of the work as part of a plan to make His ways known to humanity (Kline 85). Christ himself quiets Mechtild's fear explaining that although human hands are collecting her words, he approves of the action. In fact, his words stress that the visions are not intended for Mechtild only but that they are to serve the large community of believers: *ōI am also the handed of thame that writeth that booke, and worche with thame ande helpere in alle thynges. Als ofe that thay that redys this booke gyffe me worschepeö* (587-88). Indeed, other biographical details within *The Booke* serve to support its divinely mandated purpose.

The text details her parents' fear that the sickly Mechtild would die as an infant. Worrying that she would die before being baptized, they rush her to a priest. This priest examines the child and calms their fears, as well as any held by the reader over the veracity of *The Booke*. He says, *ōWhate drede ye? This childe schalle noght yitt dey, bott furste sche schalle be a hoolye womane and religious, ande manye miracles God schalle worche in hereö* (70). The concept that the work is a revelation delivered by God to Mechtild for the purpose of instruction the wider community of Christians is an important part of the *Booke's* theology. While the visions depict intimate scenes of one woman's encounter with God, they also serve to endorse certain theological concepts important to Mechtild and the community at Helfta. Indeed, Bynum's research regarding this work suggests that *The Booke* was crafted communally and that Mechtild saw herself as a *ōdirect channel to God's power; [she] provided information about what practices Christ*

wished performed and about the state of souls in the afterlife (181). The idea that her visions were a divine gift for her righteous lifestyle would have been supported by church doctrine as well. McGinn explains that, although Pope Innocent taught that God is too great to be seen by the human eye, a person could cultivate visions of God through pure living (̈Visionsö 228). With *The Booke*̈s communal purpose in mind and because representational spaces are so tied to social practices, it therefore becomes necessary to pay attention to the spiritual practices that her visions endorse as we explore Mechtildës visions.

As Mechtildës narrative progresses, the allegorical dimension of her visions becomes clear. Through her showings, Mechtilde demonstrates a process through which others can live the pure life and find their own unity with Christ. That is to say, the visions prove the virtue of her thinking. God has granted her visions; therefore, what she thinks must in fact be truth. Bynum notes that in many ways her theology is much more conservative than that of her peers at Helfta. Where Gertrude the Great ̈projects womenö into the ̈structures and rituals of monasticismö (Bynum 207), Mechtildës work avoids such politically charged topics. Instead, she focuses almost totally on the spiritual and upon issues of the soul. The allegory of her visions serve as an endorsement of certain traditions of the church, most notably the sacrament of penance, and her writing, including her visions of heaven, serve to perpetuate the mystical ideal that when pursuing God, emotions trump reason.

Certainly, Mechtilde was operating from a center of Western European mysticism, and her work becomes very important to later mystics. However, mysticism is a difficult

term to define, and as the writings of mystics have become more and more popular amongst critics, its meaning has come to encompass a wider and wider pool of authors. Decades ago, David Knowles described the "essence" of mysticism as being the "real but supernatural union between the soul, with its powers of knowledge and love, and God" (21). Certainly, this definition is appropriate to Mechtild's work, which abounds with descriptions of her soul's, and sometimes her body's, union with Christ. Still, discussing "mysticism" is a perilous enterprise, for its nature varies depending on the time and place. Indeed, while mysticism flowered in the Middle Ages, it has been an important part of the tapestry of Christianity from the beginning. To develop an understanding of this genre of Christian writing, I turn to the work of Bernard and Patricia McGinn. The McGinns stress that mysticism is not some subset or alternate form of Christianity; instead, it is a key component of the faith and has been since its founding (̈Earlyö 11). They argue that the essential characteristics of mysticism are personal encounters with God and the desire to communicate these encounters with the larger community of Christian believers (̈Earlyö 13-21). As noted above, Mechtild saw herself as a spiritual guide, a woman to whom God granted the special gift of visions as a reward for years of preparation and yearning. However, Mechtild's work operates inside the larger context of Christian mystics whose primary goal was, as is the case of most medieval theology, to ̈deepen the understanding of faithö and ̈enkindle charityö so that ̈believers could arrive at a higher understanding of loveö (̈The Floweringö 19). In this way, mysticism becomes more than a contemplative exercise focusing only upon reflection and spiritual experience. Instead, it becomes an active part of one's religion through which spiritual truths may be passed

on to others. This seems to be the case with Mechtild, whose *Booke* seems focused on illuminating a pathway to God and justifying certain communal traditions.

In Mechtild's visions, achieving a unity with God is her primary focus. She relates her increasingly intimate encounters with Christ, and a common motif is her overwhelming yearning for these personal moments. It is, as noted above, a spirituality of emotion. While McGinn notes that such unions are not ubiquitous in mystic literature, the union with God or Christ is a common motif in later mystical expressions of love. Mechtild's vision speaks to just this sort of personal and intimate encounter with Christ, and her retelling of these experiences emphasizes the emotional impact of the meetings. She reports that stress and apprehension foretell the coming of Christ. Indeed, the references to these terrors occur so often that they seem to be an integral part of the experience. That she felt "drede" at the notion of coming into contact with Christ is her constant refrain. Her reaction to the early vision at the Feast of Annunciation is indicative of the anxiety that she felt as her visions approached: "Also atte the same tyme this worde of holye wrytte was putte in here mynde...and anone sche begane to drede ande to thenke whate sche schulde doo whene owre lorde schulde come" (75-76). In addition to her building *ödrede*, this showing also reflects her continued insistence that these experiences are not of her own doing. She insists that she was chosen for this, and while the consistent apprehension that she expresses at Christ's coming might be construed as fear, the text makes clear that this reaction is actually indicative of her great faith. She explains:

Offe this sche hadde sorrow and drede notwithstandynge here holye and vertuose lyffynge in younge age and alle tyme. Ande that was no wondere for the holyere that mane be in the syght of God, the lowere and vnworthyere he schulde have hymselfe ... and the more clerere a man felys his owne conscience or clene fro synne, the more he awe to drede in awntere he hadde offenede God (75).

A common motif in mystical writing is an expression of spiritual inadequacy, and Mechtild's identifies this sort of humility before God as a necessary step in a person's spiritual progress. For Mechtild the dread and trembling that she feels upon Christ's approach confirm her pure soul and ready spirit, and her showings are only granted after these emotional outbursts: "while sche hadde this drede and contricion whiche I have schewede, sodaynelye sche sawe owre lorde Ihesu on hight" (75). As she becomes more and more awed of Christ's power, she resolves to live a more spiritual life, and her decisions to do so seem to prepare her for future spiritual experiences. This cyclical connection between emotion and spirituality is central to Mechtild's theology. As she becomes more spiritually pure, she becomes more emotionally ready for an experience with Christ, and as a result of the experience, her spiritual awareness increases.

As noted above, Mechtild was writing at a time when a vibrant community of mystics existed on the European continent. As such, it should not be a surprise that she was influenced by many of the same writers that inspired others working in the tradition. Certainly, Mechtild's work owes much to Bernard of Clairvaux and his disciples. Of course, the same could be said for many of the mystic writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Bernard was a very influential theologian who revitalized

monasticism and reinvigorated mysticism.⁴¹ He energized his readers with his focus on emotion. As Ann W. Astell explains, "Because of Bernard's example and instruction, medieval readers and writers could freely appropriate the bridal ego and use the words of Canticles to express their emotions, inner attitudes, and aspirations" (77). Bernard opened up for his readers a personal spirituality, one which, as we see in Mechtilde, focuses on emotion as the core element. At the center of this theology is the marriage of the human soul with the divine being, and it is clear that he, like Origen, saw this "marriage" as a moment of transformation (Gilson 123).⁴² In his eight-six homilies on *The Song of Songs*, Bernard establishes the ideas about the marriage of God and the soul that will be so influential to later writers, including Mechtilde. Because his writings were so important to these later mystics, his discussions of the nature of the mystic experience provide insights into how to read the visions of those who follow him. His scheme begins by discussing the interpretation of the physical descriptions of the *Song*. He reasserts the belief that God has no physical body; however, in his discussion of God's nature, he employs metaphorical language to describe the indescribable in human terms:

I allow of course that God does not have these members by his nature, they represent certain modes of our encounter with him. The heartfelt desire to admit one's guilt brings a man down in lowliness before God, as it were to his feet; the heartfelt devotion of a worshiper finds in God renewal and refreshment, the touch as it were, of his hand; and the delights of contemplation lead on to the ecstatic repose that is the fruit of the kiss of his mouth. Because his providence rules over all, he is all things to all, yet to speak with accuracy; he is in no way what these things are. If we consider him in himself, his home is in inaccessible light... (4.4)

⁴¹ Underhill notes that mysticism flourished in the eleventh and fourteenth centuries but waned during the twelfth. However, the flowering of mysticism in the late thirteenth century was spurred by the writings of powerful twelfth-century mystics such as Bernard and Saint Hildegard (459).

⁴² For more on Origen's influence on mysticism and his ideas about paradise, see the first chapter of this dissertation.

For Bernard, and the mystics that follow him, speaking as though God has a physical body allows the writer to express ideas about the experience with the divine. Of course, this has implications for the visionary's perception of the heavenly landscape. In stressing that these physical descriptions are to be read as metaphors for the divine experience, Bernard implies that heavenly landscapes also should be read metaphorically. Indeed, Bernard goes on to state that "this vision is not for the present life; it is reserved for the next," suggesting that the mystic vision is a metaphor for what will take place in the afterlife (31.1).

Having established the metaphorical nature of the vision's physical imagery, Bernard asserts that God cannot be fully understood until He is loved and that a desire for God's love must be the ultimate goal of the mystic (Tamburello 111). He writes:

Please do not accuse me of presumption if I yield to this impulse of love. My shame indeed rebukes me, but love is stronger than all...I ask, I crave, I implore; let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. Don't you see that by his grace I have been for many years now careful to live a chaste and sober life...Yet in all of these practices, there is only evidence of my fidelity, nothing of enjoyment...I obey commandments, to the best of my ability I hope, but in doing so my soul thirsts like parched land. If therefore, he is to find my holocaust acceptable, let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. (9.2)

For Bernard, the allegory of the *Song* becomes the expression of the mystic's longing for God. The experience of the mystic springs forth not from reason but instead from emotion. Indeed, even obedience to the legalistic strictures of religion is merely an expression of devotion. He writes that for a soul to experience the true joy and sustenance that comes from the union with God, it is necessary to be totally consumed with desire

for Him. Finally, Bernard's writings stress that the outcome of this desire will ultimately be a union with God, although this merger is not one of equals. He explains:

Although the creature loves less, being a lesser being, yet if it loves with its whole heart nothing is lacking, for it has given all. Such love, as I have said, is marriage, for a soul cannot love like this and not be beloved; complete and perfect marriage consists in this exchanged love, and loved more intensely by the Word...Happy is the soul who is to be anticipated in blessedness so sweet! Happy the soul who has been allowed to experience the embrace of such bliss! For it is nothing other than love, holy and chaste, full of sweetness and delight, love utterly serene and true, mutual and deep, which joins two beings, not in one flesh, but in one spirit, making them no longer two but one. As Paul says: "He who is united to God is one spirit to him." (83.6)

Here, Bernard stresses that goal of the mystic is to love God completely, for even though she cannot reach the same level of love as God, the all-consuming love is the source of transformation. These lines stress that the soul is not destroyed by its experience with God, using the metaphor of marriage to show how two separate beings have come together to be united as two in one. In this way, Bernard's understands the mystic encounter to be a metaphor for the future union with Christ that those who love Him will one day enjoy, and Mechtild of Hackeborn builds upon this philosophy in her own vision of the spiritual union.

Mechtild begins her *Booke* by summarizing the *öschweyngsö* that she enjoyed over the course of her life, and the sheer number of these spiritual experiences is staggering. The droning tone of this early exposition belies the poetic language that characterizes the more detailed descriptions of her visions. Indeed, the Middle English text is at its strongest when it recounts the sweeping vistas that Mechtilde encounters or when it metaphorically presents her intimate scenes with Christ. This text seems to be, at

its core, a work of powerful emotions and the occasional alliterative language or detailed description adds a degree of poetry to the sometimes tedious prose. The majority of her visions depict one of her regular meetings with Christ. Many of these are highly symbolic, and most focus on His desire to build an intimate relationship with her. Her vision during the feast of Annunciation is exemplary of the tenor of these visions:

Then sche herede howe owre lorde sayde to here: ⁊Thowe erte in me, and I am in the, and I schalle neuere forsake the.øWith these words sche hadde suche affecioun of love that sche desyrede none othere thyng of God bott to gyffe hym thankkynges ande worscheppes with alle the myghttes of here herte. (82)

Here, we find many of the elements that most characterize Mechtild's *Booke*: powerful emotion, instruction in spiritual truth, and the desire for oneness in spirit with Christ. Indeed, this spiritual union seems to be Mechtild's driving desire, and in one of her earliest vision she asks "Symeon to pray for here that sche might be vnbownde fro the bodye and be with Cryste" (7). Ultimately, this prayer is answered, and Mechtild enjoys a series of unions with Christ that assert the importance of breaking free of the confines of the physical and the temporal in order to become spiritually connected to the divine for eternity.

Mechtild's vision during the Feast of Annunciation illustrates the normal pattern of her showings. As noted above, her experiences are typified by strong emotion, spiritual lessons, and a movement into union with Christ. Furthermore, they are highly metaphoric in nature, and the language that Mechtild uses to describe her spiritual transformations is moving. The action of this vision begins when her physical body transforms to gold as she stands in Christ's presence. The melting of her solid form into liquid is a common

motif in Mechtild's work, and she uses this sort of imagery within her descriptions of several encounters with Christ. This metamorphosis is indicative of her desire to break free of the confines of her body and become part of Christ. Certainly in her description of her experience at the Feast of Annunciation, she makes clear that this transformation is allegorical in nature, stressing that it illustrates both the weakness of her earthly body and Christ's power to transform her spiritually. In the moment of her change, she is also aware of her spiritual shortcomings. She writes:

Ande sodaynllye agayne sche stode in his presence schynynge ale golde. Here was a meruelous chaungynge so sodaynle! Bott in this sche hadde knowynge that alle the good dedes in whiche sche was neglygente were perfourmyde and made perfyte in the hoolye conuersacion of Cryste and that alle her perfeccion and affeccion was perfitlye reformmed in the perfeccion of Goddys sonne (76).

The focus on her negligence in performing good deeds is noteworthy, for her visions often focus on the soul's need for penance and upon the practices of that sacrament. Having experienced a spiritual transformation and having rededicated herself to the service of her Lord, the vision closes with a taste of the union for which she longs. After instructing Mechtild in certain truths about the nature of God and Christ, Jesus takes Mechtild onto his lap and begins to grant her a series of experiences in his body. Ulrike Weithus has noted that in mystical texts bodies often serve as spaces to be explored (141). Mechtild uses this technique in this scene as she enters Christ and begins to investigate the world through him. First, she is allowed to see things through his eyes. Then, she is allowed to hear through his ears. Finally, he grants her the exercise of his mouth so that she can worship God in the same manner as Christ. Certainly, this is a

telling moment; one purpose of mystical literature is to allow the mystic to explain the unexplainable. That is to say, visions allow the mystic to use earthly language to describe spiritual ideals. In this scene, Mechtild uses Christ's body to spatially convey meaning related to penance and the soul.

In this early vision, Christ is preparing Mechtild for her spiritual journey towards oneness with him, and one of the first experiences that he grants her is the opportunity to enter his person and investigate the world as he experiences it. Once she has completed this exploration, she is given her first taste of oneness with Christ:

Ande so this chosene [Mechtild's] sawle was fullye to here semyng incorporate to Cryste ande in the love of God softene ande liquifiede. As softe waxe enpresse to a seele scheweth the lyknes of the seele, ryght so in suche a symylitude that blessed sawle of the maydens was made alle oone and [onede] with her dere love. (79)

Mechtild's consistent use of metaphor is one of the hallmarks of her literary style, and in this scene, the metaphor of the wax seal illustrates her concept of unity with Christ. Again, her physical body is transformed into a malleable form. As the wax, Mechtild is impressed into the seal of her God, but she is not destroyed. Instead, she is reformed into the image of her "dere love." In using this metaphor, Mechtild incorporates a common trope of mystical literature into her text. In common medieval lore, water, and by extension other liquids, was imagined as the element of transformation. Thus, mystics often used it to represent a moment of spiritual change. In writing about Mechtild of Magdeburg's visions, James C. Franklin writes, "Mechtild used water and liquids as symbols of transition between man's soul and his body, and between heaven and the realm

of God^ô and earth ^ó the realm of man^ö (35). As noted above, since Origen, Christian thinkers promoting the idea of a spiritual union between the soul and God were very concerned with the nature of flesh in this equation as well as the sanctity of individual identity. In her metaphor of the wax seal, Mechtild navigates these treacherous theological waters by using the language of transformation, but as she presents it, it is an alteration of type not kind. Her essence remains unchanged, yet she is transformed into the image of Christ. As we shall see in her vision of the heavenly mountain, the idea of individual souls transformed into a single likeness which reflects God^øs own image is central to her understanding of the heavenly realms and is likewise central to her own theology.

Another hallmark of these visions is the initial wave of emotion, often described as a feeling of great dread or terror. The anxiety she feels at the coming of Christ is penitential in nature, allowing her the opportunity to purge her spirit of guilt and inadequacies so that she can be transformed and come into a perfect union with her Lord. In her insistence that the first step in the journey into God is both emotional and penitential, Mechtild echoes Bernard who wrote, *“The heartfelt desire to admit one^øs guilt brings a man down in lowliness before God^ö (4.4).* In this way, Mechtild's experiences become metaphors for the human soul's individual journey towards perfection through the sacrament of penance. Put plainly, for the soul to receive its ultimate reward, it must purge itself through penance, and emotions lead the way to this sacrament. In stressing emotion^øs role in penance and increased purity, Mechtild has support from Christian tradition. Saint Paul himself wrote, *“Wherefore, my dearly*

beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but much more now in my absence, with fear and trembling work out your salvation.ö (Phil 2:12). Thus we see in this vision that Mechtild is first purged of sin, then given instruction regarding spiritual truth, and finally brought into union with God. Taken within the larger context of the work, her experiences with the purgative, illuminative, and unitive⁴³ ways point the way to the soul's ultimate destination at one with its God, and the moving image of a soul brought into oneness with God ends her Annunciation vision. Although few of Mechtild's visions are as lengthy, poetic, or elaborate as this one, many mimic this vision's organization, and its focus on penance, truth, and unity are central parts of Mechtild's theology.

Mechtild receives her most complete vision of heaven relatively early in the course of her showings, and within the larger context of Mechtild's narrative, her vision of heaven serves as but one stop on her journey towards unity with Christ. Because it provides an early glimpse of the end point of the spiritual journey, it remains one of the *Booke's* most critically important visions, for her description of the heavenly mountain speaks to several prevailing themes of Mechtild's work. Most importantly, the scene completes the action of the Vision of Annunciation as Mechtild witnesses the eternal union of the souls in heaven, a metaphor that mirrors her own emotional experiences with Christ. This allows Christ to instruct Mechtild on his desire for humanity to come to him while at the same time symbolically illustrating the penance required to get there. In addition to these narrative functions, this showing repeats some key motifs of other

⁴³ Here, I borrow language from Monica Furlong to describe the process by which the mystic experiences God.

medieval visions of paradise. Within Mechtild's description of the heavenly landscape, we find that she stresses its incomprehensibility, its natural splendor, and its overwhelming sense of order, an order derived in part from its inhabitants' unity with God.

Mechtild's long awaited showing of heaven comes after a meeting with Simon Peter whom she sees standing beside an altar with three sunbeams issuing forth from his heart. Mechtild recognizes that these lights are symbolic of his great faith, and his example stirs her to speak with him. Her request is simple but indicative of her all-consuming desire to be one with Christ. She asks, "A nowe blessedde Symeone, gette to me be thyne prayers a verre desyre to be vnbownd fro this bodye ande to be with Cryste" (140). Simon councils her that it is better that she give herself over to God's will and accept whatever He provides. Mechtild never responds to his admonitions, but the next scene finds her singing praises to God. We might assume that she has taken Simon's advice, for this song ushers in another showing, which begins with Jesus asking her whether she would come to the holy mountain to live with him for forty days and forty nights. With this, her prayer is answered, bringing her that which she "couettes" most, the opportunity to be with Christ in his kingdom.

In order to reach the two thrones of heaven, Mechtild is required to first climb a great mountain. The steep climb is a common motif in mystical and penitential literature and serves to illustrate the trials required by the journey to God.⁴⁴ Mimicking God's suffering is an important part of the affective experience for Mechtild, and the need to

⁴⁴ The penitential nature of the mountain journey makes it a popular image for Purgatorial literature as well. We find this image most famously used in Dante.

suffer for Christ as Christ suffered for her is central to her theology. Like the narrator of the *Pearl*, Mechtild expresses difficulty in finding the language to describe what she sees, and just as in *Pearl*, the insistence that earthly language is not sufficient to describe the wonders of heaven indicates that she is using earthly metaphors to describe the indescribable. As she seeks to describe the landscape that surrounds her, the text stresses the majesty and order of the landscape:

Thane he schewyd here ane hye hille ande of a wonderfule gretness lastynge
from the este into the weste. This hille hadde vij degrees wharebye men schulde
go vuppe to the hyght of that hille, ande to eche grees was a well. (143)

As Mechtild advances up the mountain, she focuses on its natural features: its height, the arrangement of the trees, the beautiful flowers. In her usual didactic style, Mechtild makes sure that her readers do not miss the significance of these metaphors. She explains, “This hille betokened the holye conuersacion of Cryste; the trees betokened vertues” and so all were refresched of the frewte of the duers trees after the merytes of thare vertues (123). In this way, the image of heaven that she presents is bound up with theological significance, focusing on the sacrifice of Christ and upon the virtues that must be cultivated by believers if they are to one day successfully follow Mechtild on their journey to heaven.

The challenge presented to Mechtild is to climb this steep and difficult mountain. Although she faces this obstacle alone, Christ is continually near her to offer instruction. The significance of this metaphor is obvious. Here, Mechtild’s spiritual journey continues to mirror the penitential journey of all people. The path is much too difficult to travel

alone; however, an intimate relationship with Christ allows the believer, like Mechtild in this vision, to successfully navigate the treacherous climb. As Christ journeys alongside her, his teachings focus on the penitential nature of the experience. He explains that as she proceeds up the mountain, she must drink from these wells in turn, for each serves to cleanse her of a different sin. Because she cannot appear before God's throne with the taint of sin upon her, she must stop at these wells in order to be purified. Again, the language of this image is highly metaphorical. Christian tradition makes clear that sins impede humanity's relationship with God, so in order to progress in the journey to paradise, believers must cleanse themselves through the sacrament of penance. Christ explains to Mechtild that the first well washes her clean of the taint of pride, the next wrath, the next envy, and so on. Each time she drinks from the well, the refrain is clearly penitential in nature: the wells "clensed here fro the spotty of synne." As a reward for performing these rituals, Jesus commands Mechtild to look up, and it is at this moment that he grants her first vision of heavenly society as her reward for fulfilling her spiritual obligations.

It is interesting that a text so devoted to the promotion of a personal relationship with Christ should focus its attention so much on the community of heaven. However, as we have seen in other visions of heaven, the image of heaven's spaces serves as a focal point for a text's central ideals. For Mechtild, whose work focuses on the necessity of becoming one with Christ, heaven becomes a place where God resides in everyone. In this scheme, her fleeting earthly experiences with Christ are but tastes of the eternal unity enjoyed by and within the heavenly community. As she follows Christ's command and

looks around, her attention is drawn to the unity of heaven's inhabitants, a unity that extends from each individual's oneness with God. She writes:

Alle the companye of sayntys ande of aungels whyche was abowne in the hyste
toppe of the hille sange so merylye with oure lorde God ande in God with a fulle
swete sange of love as hitt hadde bene oo voyce. (144)

Where heaven in *Pearl* is a majestic city filled with jewels and processions of queens, the image presented by Mechtild is much simpler: the top of a mountain where two thrones are surrounded by the congregation of saints and angels, who have joined together in praising God. Indeed, the landscape, so prominent in the journey up the mountain, disappears into Mechtild's description of the unity of the heavenly community, a group singing praises not only to God but also *ōwithō* and *ōinō* God. The individuals that she sees are connected not in body but in spirit. In this simple description, Mechtild deftly navigates through the great dilemma of Origen and Bernard as she sees describes a society operating as one body within and through God while still maintaining individual identities. God is, as Bernard said, *ōThe efficient causeí of every creatureö* (4.4).

Mechtild explains this transformation later in the *Booke*. She writes that when a soul passes from the body and joins God in heaven that God becomes everything for that soul. She writes:

Than in the furste passynge owte owre lorde perseth so that blessed sawlle with is
devyne virtue and fulfylles alle the wittyws of the sowlle that God ys the eye of
thesowlle with whiche the sawlle see; ande God ys the light be the whiche the
sowlle seethí Also he es the herynge of the sawlle wherewith the sawlle
hyerí He ys aalso the smelle of the sowlle ande the breth brethyngéí Also God
es the voice ande the tonge of the sawlleí And moreover God es the lyffe of the
sawlle. (583-85)

In its emphasis on the soul's physical experience within the body of God, this passage echoes Mechtild's earlier encounter on Christ's lap. By placing the soul within the body of God but allowing it to continue to perceive the world through its own senses, Mechtild avoids the problems of indistinction that condemned the work of Eckhart and other later mystics and asserts a doctrine of individuality.⁴⁵ Indeed, this is the ultimate metamorphosis that is predicted through Mechtild's various transformations in the text. Each soul that is accepted into the community of the heaven becomes one with Christ, converting the society into a perfect order, a society that literally and figuratively speaks in a single voice, the voice of God while at the same time maintaining its own individual understanding of the world.

At this point, Mechtild resumes her journey to the top of the mountain to be with Christ, continuing to drink from the purifying wells as she goes. Once she reaches the top, she provides a description of the actual dwelling place of God: "Also abowne in the hyght of that hille were two thronys full fayre schynynge" (145). The first throne is the seat of the holy trinity, and from it flow "fowre ryueres of waters of lyffe" (145). These rivers indicate the life giving powers of God: wisdom, providence, plenitude, and love. Mechtild explains that it is from this place that God will one day "wasche eche teere fro the eyen of hys sayntes," a powerful indication of the personal relationship that God plans to enjoy with His servants (145). As is common in medieval descriptions of paradise, the overwhelming visual stimulation of this space comes from its light. It is a light that both

⁴⁵ McGinn notes that Eckhart's insistence on the "absolute unity" of God was the most problematic of his teachings, leading to his condemnation both within his own time and by modern theologians (̄Neoplatonism̄).

fills the eyes and can be felt upon the skin. This all-encompassing light is a common image within *The Booke*. Most often, it emanates out of individuals, such as Christ or Simon, who are blessed with spiritual purity. This light seems to be indicative of an individual's nearness to God. Bernard explains that light is a fundamental part of God, saying "if we consider him in himself, his home is an inaccessible light and nothing has the remotest chance of hiding from him or of escaping that light of his that penetrates everywhere" (4.4). In Mechtild's description of the heavenly court, the light is a perpetual part of the landscape and of the landscape's inhabitants. The light permeates everything in this vision, suggesting the intimate connection that exists between the landscape of heaven, its community, and the Godhead. Put simply, her description of heaven's spaces serves to illustrate spiritual truth, emphasizing the intimate connection that exists between God and the heavenly community in this place, a connection that is further developed by Mechtild in her ultimate marriage with Christ.

Eventually, Mechtild turns her attention to the image before her, Christ upon his throne with Mary seated at his right. The sight of these two arrayed in their splendor affects Mechtild physically, or it might be better said, emotionally:

This othere maydene, Molde, when sche sawe that hye kynge of blysse, Ihesu, Goddys sonne, in the worschepefulle seete of his imperyale magnifycence ande his holye modere on his ryght syde, for the wondere of hys blessed face whiche the aungells atte alle times desyre to behalde, sche lakkede or faylede of here bodylye myghtys, and before the throwne of the holye trinite sche felled downe. (147)

Mechtild has seen Jesus before; however, seeing him clothed in his heavenly majesty proves too much for her. However, he does not let her suffer long, for he quickly comes

down from his throne to help her. This act, the imperial king of heaven descending from his throne to personally attend to the needs of the individual, fulfills Mechtild's desire for a personal and individual relationship with Christ. Later in the text, Christ calls for Mechtild once more, and she returns to these thrones. In this scene, she finds herself sitting to the left of Christ and is brought once again into his lap. She relates the experience as a moment of personal connection with her God:

Ande sche hereselfe to here semyng, was att the lefte side ande rested here in his lappe and with the eere of his herte intentelye sche lystenede ande toke hede howe that herte of Cryste, full of sweetness, moot or bette as itt hadde bene of a myghtty powse withoutyne any sesynge. The powse of that deuyne herte sownned as if he hadde clepede that soule. (326)

This desire propels the *Booke's* narrative, and her cultivation of virtue allows her to fulfill this goal. Christ's own words at the end of this showing focus on his desire for the sort of relationship that requires human beings to become at one with him. Responding to Mechtild's question about what he desires most from humanity, Christ says, "Hitt pleyse me moste that men know me in that goodnesse wherewith I abyde...Ande moreouer contynuelye be my grace I draw hym to me" (149). With these words, this showing ends, and although Mechtild is not granted the eternal oneness with God that she sees in heaven, she does gain the knowledge that the soul's ultimate destination is into unity with God, a goal that Mechtild finally receives within the vision of her marriage to Christ.

Although the vision of Mechtild's marriage to Christ is not the final vision of the text, it is the moment in which she receives the promise of her own eternal unity with God. Marriage with Christ is an important motif in the work of female mystics, especially

according to McGinn for their metaphorical significance (öThe Languageö 214). In essence, when the bride chooses Christ as her husband, she has turned away from earthly modes of pleasure in order to focus on the cultivation of a spiritual relationship with Him. As we have seen, Mechtild makes frequent use of metaphors of metamorphoses. In this scene, marriage becomes another transformation, for as she takes the ring symbolizing her bond with Christ, she enters into the sacramental union with Christ. That is to say, she is promising to be his and his alone, sacrificing the earthly for the spiritual. While Halligan points out that the marriage vision does not represent a "perfect transforming union," it is a powerful symbol of the unity that the soul desires with Christ, and it serves as a promise of the ultimate conjunction of the soul with God when it joins the heavenly community (43). Ironically, this vision comes after a period in which Mechtild "felte noght of the presence of the lorde as sche was wonte" (408). Illustrating the soul's need for oneness with Christ, this spiritual separation affects her physically, and she greatly desires "comfforth" (408). At last, Christ arrives and instructs her on the offerings made to him by other virgins. This talk saddens Mechtild who feels that she has nothing to offer him until she sees Mary standing beside her with a ring. Mechtild takes this ring and offers it to Christ, who joyously receives it from her. The symbolism of this act is not lost on Mechtild who remarks: öIt semede that sche was weddede in that manere to Cryste" and hoped that "itt schulde suffyce to here if alle oure lorde walde gyffe here a payne in the saame fyngere that longth to that rynge alle the dayes of here lyffe" (409). Indeed, he grants Mechtild's desire for marriage, saying "I schalle hyffe the rynge rychelye ande nobeleye arrayede with vij precyouse stones whiche stonys thowe mayste remembere the

vij articles of my godhede" (409). He goes on to explain that he desires all of humanity for his spouses, describing the crucifixion as the moment of his wedding to all of humankind. Within the Christian church, the sacrament of marriage is a powerful symbol of unity. Brooke explains that in the Middle Ages marriage carried both social and religious significance. He argues that marriage served as both an irrevocable pact of social unity between a man and a woman and an allegory of the union between Christ and the church (39-45). In this way, Mechtild's exchange of rings with Christ is a promise that she will one day enjoy the same relationship with him that she experienced within heaven, a marriage relationship wherein two entities come together as one.

Metaphorically, this promise extends to the entire Christian community in the image of Christ's heart. For Mechtild, Christ's heart becomes a physical place, the space wherein the soul dwells within Him. She explains, "Also on a tyme whane sche was raueschede in spyrytte, to here semyng sche sawe hereselfe in a wonderfulle fayre howse, whiche howse sche knew welle that itt was the herte of Chryste" (377). Inside Christ's heart, the conversation turns to penance. Again, Mechtild's desire is a penance that mirrors the suffering of Christ. He has suffered for her; therefore, she wants to suffer for him. This imitation of Christ's agony is the driving force behind a "sawle that lovys God" (377). That the offer to dwell within Christ's heart extends to all penitent believers is made clear in another vision. During her daily prayers, she is brought once again before God in heaven and is blessed by the revelation of another truth about the heavenly realm. Once again, the focus is on the unity of the heavenly community as it worships

God in Christ. As this vision draws to a close, she hears Christ's heartbeat and asks what this *öbetokene*, her standard preface to an interpretation of the metaphor. Christ answers:

Thees sownynges betokens iij words with whiche I speke to a lovyng sowlle.
The ferste worde that y speke es: Withdrawe the from alle creatures. The seconde
worde es: Entre yn, that es to saye trustye as a spowse. Ande the thrydde worde
es: Into the chambere, that es to saye, into the devyne herte. (367-68)

In this way, the point of entry into heaven is the heart of Christ. The language of the union is that of marriage, wherein two things become one *öas a spowse*. Like Bernard, who in his sermons on *The Songs* understands the beloved as being the entirety of the Christian church, Mechtild extends the promise of her visions to all penitential Christian souls and she communicates this idea by representing spiritual ideas spatially.

Spaces are important, for humans understand the world in relation to the landscapes that surround them. As modern readers experience Mechtild's visions, one important question that arises is what her understanding of the heavenly space says about her understanding of the world. The modern reader often imagines the medieval church to be a labyrinth of bureaucracy, dogma, and control. In this popular image, there is no room for individuals. However, recent scholarship has begun to assert that the church was not quite as monolithic as is often believed. As Robert Payne eloquently explains, "The medieval mind never completely submitted to authority. The Church, which played a major role on Sundays and feast days, succumbed to another authority during the remaining days of the week. Far from being subservient to authority, the medieval mind was rich in adventure" (13). Mechtild of Hackeborn possessed this adventurer's spirit. She believed that God desired a personal relationship with each soul and that the soul's

ability to claim this relationship was built upon its spiritual virtues rather than any earthly standard. As her *Booke* closes, Christ lists the virtues that pleased him in Mechtild:

My luffede sawlle for whome ofte thou geldeste me thankkynges, emonge hye and noble vertues gyftes in these vertues folowande namelye sche pleysede me. Fyrste in a perfyte forsakyng of hereselfe. The secoundeí was in a perfyte oonyon of here wille with myne willeí the thrydde princypalle was that sche was fulle of compassiouní the fowrte princypalle virtue was that sche luffede here neyghtboreí the fyfte princypalle virtue was that sche hadde a peeseable ande a restefulle herte. (595)

In this way, she asserts the spiritual value of a certain mode of living, and as a reflection of these principles, Mechtild's heaven presents her view of an ideal society, a society in which God's focus is on the individual and in which every soul is one with God. In this way, Mechtild's heaven reflects her ideals for spiritual perfection, and like so many other medieval representations of heaven, it illustrates the power of the heavenly space as a vehicle to interpret and define humanity's experiences with the world.

CHAPTER V

SOCIAL SPACES AND HEAVENLY PLACES: THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF *PEARL'S* HEAVENLY VISION

While Christian tradition employs many metaphors for paradise, by the fifteenth-century, the image of the celestial city had emerged as the dominant image for life within the heavenly sphere, and its primacy lingers to this day. There are good reasons for its preeminence. It is supported biblically, both in the *Revelation of Saint John*, which speaks of the New Jerusalem, and in the Gospels, wherein Jesus describes mansions and streets of gold. Theologian Jeffrey Burton Russell suggests that this image carries special weight because of its importance as the center of the kingdom and as the seat of power for the Messiah, thereby legitimizing Christ as ruler. Spatial theorists have often noted the special significance of the city as an artistic image. After all, societies strongly identify with their cultural centers, and the locus of culture in most Western societies is the city. For this reason, images of cities are often bound up with cultural significance, being used either to assert or critique social ideals and customs. If this model holds true for the image of the heavenly city so prevalent in the Middle Ages, we must ask ourselves what earthly institutions are being explored by the literary representations of this spiritual space. Thus, this chapter will trace the development of the image of an urban paradise in hopes of demonstrating how these representations often become entangled in discussion of social hierarchies and are sometimes used as vehicles for

presenting utopian examples of how earthly societies might achieve perfect order. In doing so, it will explore the fourteenth-century Middle English *Pearl*, a poem that makes use of the spatial images in order to assert the value of the types of social hierarchies that were prevalent in the later Middle Ages and to demonstrate spiritual truths about grace.

Certainly, the image of paradise in *Pearl* is one of the most striking literary representations of the heavenly city found in medieval literature. This Middle English poem, which was composed in the late fourteenth century, is a dream-narrative in which a mourning narrator experiences a vision of the afterlife. During his stay in this otherworld, he engages dialectically with an ambassador from heaven before finally being treated to a vision of the celestial community. Criticism of this poem has traditionally focused on issues of genre and purpose, and the question of whether it functions primarily as a theological treatise or whether it serves a more elegiac role has been particularly divisive. Studies of the poem's landscapes are less common,⁴⁶ and the most notable explorations into *Pearl's* spatial dimensions focus on their allegorical role in the story or upon their relation to the larger tradition of dream visions.⁴⁷ Given the amount of attention it gives to the earthly garden, its dream counterpart, and the final vision of heaven, it certainly seems the landscapes that the narrator explores are an integral part of the poem's meaning. However, interpreting the poem's spaces is a problematic exercise. The images that the poet uses are at the same time familiar and alien. While on one hand, the

⁴⁶ Sarah Stanbury's explorations of the visual effects of space are important exceptions to this statement.

⁴⁷ Two notable examples of these approaches include the work of Finlayson and Cherniss. Finlayson's influential essay "*Pearl*: Landscape and Vision" argues that the narrator's progression from earthly garden to unearthly garden to heavenly city marks his progress from spiritual ignorance to enlightenment. Michael Cherniss focus on the way in which the *Pearl* serves as a revelation shedding light onto Christian mysteries while Richard Emmerson traces the parallels that link the poem to the apocalyptic tradition.

heavenly city in the closing vision is a near exact replica of the city in *The Revelation of Saint John*, the inhabitants of this space are startling in their uniformity. Likewise, the dream space in which the narrator debates with his Pearl seems to be neither earth nor heaven nor purgatory. In these moments, questions of *öwhereö* converge with questions of *öwhy.ö* This chapter proposes to explore the narrative function of these three images. By placing the text within the context of the late medieval debate regarding the nature of heaven and its occupants, I hope to demonstrate how these images suggest a theological application of the poem. As medieval theologians became more and more concerned with the social organization of heavenly society, issues of status and rank proved divisive. Mirroring the social discourse of the day, debate existed as to whether the celestial community was organized communally, as we saw in Mechtildö's vision, or hierarchically, as we read about in the works of writers such as Thomas Aquinas. While it is impossible to argue conclusively that the author of *Pearl* was familiar with the works of any individual author, the ideas and conflicts of this theological issue permeate the religious discussion of the day, and because the poems of the *Pearl* manuscript show a depth of theological knowledge, it seems likely that the poet would been aware of such arguments.⁴⁸ Certainly, the debate between the maiden and the narrator focuses on the equity of heavenly rewards, and the closing vision of the heavenly city seems to silence the narrator's objections to the maiden's affirmations of her own, seemingly undeserved, high rank within the community. Ultimately, I argue that *Pearl* asserts the structured hierarchy of theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas, offering a tantalizing, albeit

⁴⁸ Indeed, most attempts to locate the *örealö* *Pearl*-poet imagine him as a possessor of some religious office.

fleeting, glimpse of a perfect Christian society. In this way, the poem serves as an example of the very common medieval motif of the city as a place of order, vindicates the value of social hierarchies on earth, and establishes the primacy of God's grace in regards to salvation.

The poem opens with the narrator recounting the loss of his "perle" and describing the woe he feels as a result of his separation from the object that he holds so dear. Even in this introductory section, the nature of the space that he occupies, the space in which he lost his pearl, seems to hold great significance. We learn that the pearl was lost in a garden, and as the narrator returns at harvest time, he emphasizes the natural beauty of the area:

On huyle there perle hit trendeled down
Schadowed this wortez ful schyre and schene:
Gilofre, gyingure, and gromylyoun
And pyonys powdered ay bytwene.
If hit watz semly on to sene,
A fayrre flayer et fro hit flot (41-46)

The poet's description overwhelms the senses, focusing not only on its visual appearance but also upon the beautiful sounds and smells. He argues that this is earth in its most perfect form, an Edenic garden which offers the full bounty of nature. The fact that the narrator's pearl is lost in this place, a place that is so full of life and that is representative of the best that the earth has to offer, suggests the flaws of the earthly existence. While the poem's emphasis on harvest time has been traditionally read as suggesting God's own harvest of righteous souls, an idea that conflicts with the narrator's excessive mourning, the reason for the poet's focus on the physical landscape does not become clear until the

narrator sleeps. Overcome by his mourning, he falls into a deep sleep, during which his "spyryt ther sprang in space," and he finds himself transported into a very different place (61).

The landscape in which he awakens, with its amazing cliffs and singing birds, is even more impressive than the beautiful garden in which he lost his pearl. Although he spends dozens of lines describing the landscape that he finds himself in, he ultimately admits that language is insufficient to truly recount what he sees:

So al watz dubbet on dere asyse
That fryth ther Fortwne forth me fere
The derthe therof for to deuyse
Nis no wye worthe that tonge berez. (96-100)

It seems odd that this narrator, whose sensory descriptions are always impressive in their depth and breadth, would find this space beyond his ability to describe. Indeed, his insistence that earthly language cannot do justice to this landscape serves to contrast this space with the earthly garden, a place where he found his abilities well suited for the task. This contrast suggest that while the garden might have been as fine a place as one could find on earth, it is only a pale reflection of the place in which he now stands, a clear piece of evidence that he is no longer within the earthly sphere. However, as the narrator journeys deeper into this new setting, he quickly encounters a third space, an even more beautiful area cut off from him by a jewel-filled river. Once again, he stresses that language cannot describe the wonders that he sees in this new space, but this time he is sufficiently impressed to declare that "Forthy I thoet that paradyse / Watz ther ouer gayn tho bonkez brade" (136-37). He quickly becomes obsessed with journeying over the river

to gain entrance into this paradise, but the more earnest he becomes in attempting to cross, the more he becomes aware of the dangers of making the crossing. The nature of the dangers is unclear. Andrew and Waldron argue that because "*wothez* and *wo* appear to connote the risk of discovery rather than physical danger," his "state of mind is that of a social inferior trespassing in the grounds of a castle" (61). Such a concern would certainly be fitting in a text concerned with affirming a hierarchical view of society and suggests that the text has a social dimension.

So, the narrator stands in a place that is not quite heaven and not quite earth. One of the most often overlooked aspects of *Pearl* is the nature of the space that the dreamer occupies in the vision, which as we have seen is clearly differentiated from the heavenly realm. The nature of this space is quite important, both in understanding the text as well as understanding heavenly spaces. An enclosed garden outside of a celestial city is a common motif in visions of the afterlife. However, the landscape in which the dreamer finds himself is neither cultivated nor enclosed. Indeed, the disaster of the failed river crossing in the final scene would suggest that this is not, as we find in many representations of heavenly landscapes, some sort of outer region of heaven. Certainly, the poem's description seems to suggest that it is an intermediate space, a space between the earth and heaven. Some identify this space with purgatory or some other interim space. In his quintessential examination of purgatory, Jacques La Goff explains that, while other models were in circulation, purgatory was most commonly imagined as the upper most region of hell (205). Moreover, the narrator does not undergo any sort of penitential punishment here, so this space does not seem to function as purgatory.

However, while purgatory is certainly the most famous of the interim spaces, it is not the only model in circulation. As exemplified by the Hereford Map, medieval cartographers make frequent use of a terrestrial paradise, using it as a sort of conduit between the celestial realm above and the earthly world below.

As we saw in *Brendan's Voyage*, one common motif in depictions of intermediate spaces is the way in which they are partitioned away from the celestial space. Where Tertullian and Bede employ a wall with no entrance to separate the heavenly city from the surrounding landscape, *Pearl* employs a terrifying river.⁴⁹ A similar device is employed within the stories of Saint Brendan's journey to the earthly paradise. In these tales, Brendan, like the narrator of the *Pearl*, finds himself separated from the Promised Land of the Saints by an imposing river. Although he is unable to cross into the Promised Land, the experience of looking into it is privilege enough. Indeed, Brendan's journey to a space that is between heaven and earth serves the purpose of edification, both to Brendan and the readers of his tale. The intermediate landscape in *Pearl* serves similar purposes. First, the river serves to delineate a clear line separating those who have been accepted into the heavenly community from those who have not. Secondly, it serves as a place of instruction as the narrator is able to experience the celestial space thereby gleaning important spiritual truths from the experience. In addition, *Pearl's* inclusion of this space serves as an indication of the narrator's lesser status in relation to the maiden, whom he thinks of as a mere child, illustrating the fundamental differences between earthly systems of rank and the heavenly one. Finally, the clear divisions that exist

⁴⁹ David C. Fowler identifies this as the "pure river of water of life" from *Revelation* and notes that the poet's decision to dwell upon the narrator's search for a place to cross is evident of his spiritual ignorance.

between the earthly, the interim, and the heavenly speak to the overall order of the celestial landscape and its society, ultimately serving to assert the value of the societal model that the narrator witnesses within it.

The contrast between the landscape that the narrator occupies, the interim paradise, and the space that he sees across the river, heaven, is mirrored in his inability to come to accept the new, more perfect, form of his Pearl. At first he is filled with dread, the same dread perhaps that fills him as he considers crossing the river, but as she approaches his fear changes to joy. However, just as his own grief overwhelmed his sense of God's harvest in the garden, here too his focus is upon his own desires:

O perle, quoth I, in perlez pyght
Art thou my perle that I haf playned,
Regretted by myn one on nyght?
Much longeyng haf I for the layned,
Sythen into gresses thou me aglyghte.
Pensy, payred, I forpayned,
And thou in a lyf of lykyng lyghte,
In paradys erde, of stryf vnstrayned. (241-248)

His joy at this reunion springs not from a sense of relief that she is safe but from his own joy at seeing her again. This selfishness reveals two important things about the narrator. First, he is still tied to earthly ways of thinking and thus cannot cross the river into heaven. Second, his spiritual education is weak, and he does not understand either the magnitude or the nature of what he is witnessing. His blindness is reinforced when the discussion turns to her place within the heavenly community, and it is here that the text once again takes on a social dimension.

While a handful of critics argue that the Pearl should be seen as an object and nothing else, most critics agree that the poem details the reunion of a father with his daughter who recently passed away. Although the nature of the pearl is ambiguous in the beginning, as the story progresses it becomes clear that the two share some history. The shift from pearl as an object to Pearl as a person culminates in the text as the dreamer says: "O perle, quoth I, in perleȝ pyȝt, / Art thou my perle that I haf playned?" (241-42). In George Bond's refutation of those who deny the Pearl's human dimensions, he argues that "the man and the child are represented as real persons, not personifications" (66). The Pearl's age is important, for common understanding held low expectations for such a child's position in the afterlife. After all, she would have had little time on earth to serve God and would perhaps not even have been baptized. The narrator outlines her perceived spiritual deficiencies when he says, "Thou lyfed not two ȝer in oure thede; / Thou cowtheȝ neuer God nauther plese ne pray, / Ne neuer nawther Pater ne Crede" (483-85). The focus is clearly upon the knowledge of God, or lack thereof, that she was able to cultivate while on earth. However, the narrator's mistake is applying earthly standards to the heavenly system. Indeed, the poem's structure points out his inability to make accurate judgments on such spiritual matters. The first section of the poem revolves around his loss. Even though "Kryst me comfort kenned," the narrator dwells on his earthly loss, never considering that his Pearl has moved to a better place (55). Although his experiences with the physical landscapes of his vision illustrate the primacy of the celestial over the earthly, he is unable to make the connection between the landscape and the idea. The maiden chides him for this shortsightedness later in the poem:

Sir, ȝe haf your tale mysetente,
To say your perle is al awaye
That is in cofer so comly clente
As in this gardyn gracios gaye
Hereinne to lenge for euer and play,
Ther mys nee morning come neuer nere
Her were a forser for the, in faye
If thou were a gentyl jueler (256-64)

The narrator, who still adheres to earthly values, cannot recognize that the Pearl is better off here. He is limited in his understanding of heavenly things. Indeed, when he first encounters his beloved maiden, he does not recognize her. Realization comes slowly: "On lenghe I loked to hyr there; the lenger, I knew hyr more and more" (167-68). The poet uses these early misinterpretations to set up the narrator's repeated misunderstanding of the maiden's spiritual lessons, chief of which is his insistence that she is not worthy of the rank that she holds.

Issues of rank and hierarchy were important social concerns during the mid to late Middle Ages. Certainly, medieval Europe was a culture of deep social divides. While extensive study has been made of social hierarchies during the Middle Ages, perhaps the most famous social scheme is that of "functional interdependence" (Rigby 5). This approach, with its focus on interdependence and labor, finds expression within the medieval period through the oft-quoted estates of *oratores*, *bellatores*, and *laboratores*.⁵⁰ Rigby argues that "society was thought of in terms of a body" with "each [estate] needing the services of the other to survive" (5). However, part of the social contract was that members of each group would willingly accept their place within the hierarchy. Thomas

⁵⁰ Those who pray, those who fight, and those who work.

Wimbleton illustrates this mode of thought in his fourteenth-century sermon on proper social behavior. He writes:

Herfore euery man see to what astat God hath clepid hym and dwelle he ther inne by trauayle accordyng to his degree. Thou that art a laborer or a crafti man do this trewli. If thou art a seruant other a bond man be soget and low in drede of displesynge to thy lordí thane euery man shal take reward, good other euyl, afir that he hath trauayled here. (98-117)

Wimbleton connects each person's social position with their divinely mandated purpose. Under this scheme, performing one's social role properly becomes an act of religious observance and is an important part of earning one's place in the next world. Indeed, Wimbleton suggests that while an individual might find little reward for their labors on earth, they would be rewarded for faithfully performing their social roles in the next world. Wimbleton's sermon demonstrates the connection that existed for many medieval thinkers between earthly society and spiritual ideals, illustrating that social differences were part not only part of daily life but were also a key component of the period's theology.

While Wimbleton's sermon illuminates certain ideals about social hierarchy, in reality there was a good deal of conflict between the social groups. As Maurice Keen explains, "The estates never did and never could have corresponded to reality" (3). Certainly, the medieval estates seemed to have worked more smoothly in theory than in practice, and fourteenth-century England was rife with challenges to traditional social institutions. This was a period of great social change, a time in which the social institutions of the Middle Ages were beginning to give way to new modes of living.

Hughes points to three primary factors which drove social change: the governmental strain created by The Hundred Years War, the economic shifts brought on by the Black Death of 1348, and the social change brought on by the popularization of vernacular literature (6). A fourth factor might include social unrest, for while the Peasant Revolt of 1381 is the most famous example of popular uprising during this period, it is certainly not an isolated incident.⁵¹ These events suggest a society that is in flux, a society that was at, as Hughes suggests, "a social and cultural watershed," a period in which new modes of living clashed with long-held cultural and religious ideals, and many of the period's most divisive issues seem to center of issues of social organization (6).

As Wimbledon's sermon indicates, questions about how society was to be organized were as much religious as they were social or political, and in the search for a perfect method of organizing society, the image of the heavenly society seems especially appealing. After all, heaven represents perfection; therefore, its systems should provide models for earthly schemes. However, while most would have agreed that heaven represented social perfection, less agreement existed on the question of how it would be arranged. A number of questions proved divisive, and most of these revolved around issues of assigning rank. Aquinas argued that the elect gained such rewards through charity. He writes the diversity of beatitude will be according to the difference of charity. He goes on to explain that "if one thing simply follows from another thing, the increase of the former follows from the increase of the latter. Now to have beatitude follows from

⁵¹ Britnell traces the history of social conflicts within the fourteenth century and finds armed uprisings in Bury St. Edmunds and St. Albans, more subdued challenges to authority in Cambridge and Colchester, and labor disputes in Coventry and London (172-175).

having charity. Therefore to have greater beatitude follows from having greater charity.

(93.2) For Aquinas, position in the celestial hierarchy relates directly to good works performed on earth. This sentiment was widespread during the later Middle Ages.⁵² In Colleen McDonnell's examination of medieval beliefs, she explains that to Aquinas "the measure of beatific knowledge depends on how much one loved God in one's earthly life and how much merit one has acquired" (90). Lowest on Aquinas's scale were children who died before they were baptized because they had little time to love God and contributed nothing to his Church. The choice of a young girl, who did not even have time to learn her prayers, for the narrator's guide has several meaningful ramifications. After all, such a child would be at the bottom of Aquinas's hierarchy, enjoying a simple, almost animal like happiness, having had little time to do good works.⁵³ Such ideas were at the heart of the fourteenth-century controversy over "good works and the divine gift of salvation, between what we do and the reward that waits for us in the life to come" (169). This is a fundamental question of *Pearl*, for the narrator's objections to the maiden's rank ultimately stem from his concerns about the amount of work that she would have had time to complete. Ultimately, this question is answered in the closing vision of the celestial city. In this way, heaven becomes intertwined with the period's social conflicts, for social hierarchies seem to be justified by religious ideas about differences in heavenly rewards.

⁵² This idea is expressed in much of the period's Christian literature. An example of the stress on works can be found in the fifteenth-century *Everyman* in which the protagonist finds that the only thing that will speak for him during his own judgment are his good deeds.

⁵³ *Quaestio disputata de malo* 5:3

The Pearl maiden challenges the narrator's assumptions about social hierarchy and spiritual merit as she presents herself as a queen in the celestial court despite the young age at which she died. The narrator is outraged:

Blysful, quod I, may thys be trewe?
Dyspleaseth not if speke in errour.
Art thou the queen of heuene blew,
That all the worlde schal do honour?
We leuen on Marye that grace of grewe
That ber o barne of vyrgyn flourí
We calle hyr Fenyx of Arraby,
That fereles felthe of hyr Fasor ó
Lyk to the quen of cortaysye (421-32)

Certainly, as the narrator struggles to comprehend how his young Pearl could have been granted the rank of queen within the heavenly hierarchy, these questions of works and rewards are on his mind. For her part, the maiden stresses that the issue relates to God's grace. When the narrator finally accepts the angelic maiden as his pearl, he frequently comments on his inability to grasp what he is seeing. He says, *õmore meruayle con my dom adaunt,õ õbot baysment gef myn hert a brunt,õ and õa manne's dom mo't dry'ly demme / er mynde mo't malte in hit mesureõ* (157, 174, 223-24). Again and again, the dreamer expresses the human mind's limitations in understanding such spiritual truths. The dreamer is most amazed by the maiden's queen-like demeanor. Because of his reliance on earthly standards, he cannot comprehend how the girl has become a queen. After all, she arrived so recently and had so little time to prepare herself on earth. In the earthly society, queen is a privileged position, one open only to a person of sufficient

worth. Just as the heavenly landscape is beyond his ability to describe so too does heavenly society defy his earthly understanding.

The maiden attempts to quiet his objections by offering several explanations. She begins by articulating the Augustinian view that all who enter the kingdom of heaven are given different positions of worth but that no one envies the positions of others. Indeed, she stresses that within the heavenly community everyone wishes that the others
ōcorouneȝ wern worthe tho fyueö (451). The seeming paradoxical relationship between issues of hierarchy and equality are part of Augustine's own exploration of rank, or as he puts it, the "degrees of honor and glory" that will be awarded to believers (*De civitate* 865). For many late-Classical and medieval thinkers, it was inconceivable that all of the faithful could be rewarded equally. At the same time, others asked how, if all were to be perfectly happy in heaven, could there be some who would receive a greater degree of happiness. Augustine deals with this issue in his *De civitate Dei*: "Yet it cannot be doubted that there shall be degrees. And in that blessed city there shall be this great blessing, that no inferior shall envy any superior, as now the archangels are not envied by the angels" (865). Augustine's emphasis on the social order of the angels stresses that a hierarchy in which those assigned lower positions do not envy those in higher positions is part of God's original plan for the world. Elaine Pagels argues that Augustine believes that the "original sin involved nothing else than Adam's prideful attempt to establish his own autonomous self-government" instead of being content with the role that God had given him (373). In the same way, when the narrator of *Pearl* argues that the maiden is not worthy of the position that God has given her, he seeks to put earthly constraints on

heavenly gifts and to limit God's grace in distributing rewards. The image of heaven that Augustine presents in *De civitate Dei* corrects this sin as each member of the heavenly court willingly accepts his or her assigned position, an idea that is mirrored in *Pearl* when the maiden argues for a community unified in the body of Christ.

While a modern reader might argue that submitting to social order limits freewill, Augustine insists that the act of submitting to heaven's hierarchy frees a person from sin:

Neither are we to suppose that because sin shall have no power to delight them, free will must be withdrawn. It will, on the contrary, be all the more truly free! In that city, then, shall be free will, one in all the citizens, and indivisible in each, delivered from all ill, filled with all good, enjoying indefeasibly the delights of eternal joys! (866)

In this way, Augustine uses the metaphor of heaven as eternal city to stress his utopian ideal of a society oblivious to its social divisions with every member of society devoted to their individual position, united by their delight in God. Such explanations do not appease the narrator, who continues his objections:

I may not traw, so God me spede,
That God wolde writhe so wrange away
Of countes, damysel, par ma fay
Wer fayr in heuen to halde asstate
Other elleg a lady of lasse array
Bot a queen o hit is to dere a date! (488-93)

Here, the narrator focuses on issues of rank and time, asserting that with no time to do God's work the maiden could not have been placed in such a privileged position. He continues to argue a works-based approach to heavenly rank, a theological position made impossible by the maiden's age. The Pearl's response to this objection focuses on the

nature of the heavenly community itself. She describes each citizen as being part of the body of Christ: *ōRyght so is vch Krysten sawle / a longande lym to the Mayster of mysteö* (461-62). This image echoes the ideas of writers such as Mechtild of Hackeborn who stressed the unity of the celestial congregation. Like Mechtild, the Pearl asserts the unity of the community within Christ. Each is an individual who also operates as part of Christ's own body. In this way, the text deals with the paradoxes of hierarchy and equality noted above. While each soul holds a different rank within the community, they are equal through their unity in Christ.

The Pearl-maiden follows this illustration with a sermon that lasts until the moment of the closing vision of the heavenly city. She begins her lesson with the parable of the vineyard. Thomas Wimbleton's fourteenth-century homily illustrates the way in which medieval theologians often connected it to issues of rank and reward. He writes:

To spiritual vndirstondyng this housholdere is oure lord Iesu Crist, that ðis heed of the househould of holi chircheō í For right as thee seeth in tilienge of the material vine there beeth diuerse laboreris: for summe kuttyn away voyde braunchis; summe maken forkes and rayles to beren vp the veyne; and summe diggen away the olde ertheí Ryght so in the chirche beeth needful thes thre offices: presthod, knyghthod, and laboreris.ö (15-39)

Wimbleton's reading of the parable focuses on its social dimensions rather than its theological ones. In connecting each set of laborers to one of society's estates, he asserts that although the earthly system might proscribe different rewards for each group, the work that they do is equally important and divinely mandated. Therefore, despite the differences in their contributions, the three estates are ultimately rewarded equally through the grace of God. Again, Wimbleton asserts the value and purpose of social

hierarchies at the same time that he emphasizes the equality of their members' compensation. This paradox of similar reward for different work is at the heart of the Pearl's debate with the narrator. He insists on a system of merit achieved through works while she argues for the munificence of God's grace. While it is impossible to say whether or not the *Pearl*-poet would have been familiar with Wimbeldon's sermon, it does illustrate that this parable was used in connection of rewards and grace, and it certainly seems that the *Pearl*-maiden uses it to justify the importance of the generosity of God's grace in understanding the relationship of rank and equality within the heavenly community.

The Pearl maiden begins by making it clear that the parable relates directly to heaven and its society: "In sample he can ful graythely gesse, / And lykneȝ hit to heueb lyȝteö (499-500). The basic narrative of the parable is left unchanged. A group of men agree to work for the master of a vineyard for the wages of a penny. Happy to have this wage, the workers begin a hard day's work. Later in the day, the master finds another group of workers and offers them the same pay if they will join in the labor. They accept his offer and join the others in the field. The master continues adding workers throughout the day, offering everyone he brings the same penny for their work. When the day's work ends and the time comes to pay the workers for their labors, the master gives each one the penny, fulfilling their agreement. However, those who worked the longest are aghast that they received the same pay as those who worked a single hour. Their protests echo the narrator's own objections to the maiden's high rank:

These bot on oure hem con streny
Vus think vus oge to take more.
More haf we serued, vus think so,
That suffred han the dayez hete,
Thenn thyse that wrogt not hourez two;
And thou dotz hem vus to counterfete! (551-56)

Like the narrator, the workers concern themselves with issues of time and work. Later workers stayed less time and did less work, so logically they should receive a lesser reward. As noted above, medieval readers would have often associated the workers who came in the eleventh hour with those who came to God through death bed confession or who died as children before they had time to do much work for the church. However, the maiden's retelling of the parable emphasizes the master's response to the workers' demands. Both versions stress that all the workers received their just rewards; they each were paid the agreed amount. However, the maiden adds one more stanza to the master's speech and a few lines onto Jesus's closing, both of which extend the parable's purpose. While the master of the biblical parable only chides the workers for questioning his generosity, in the maiden's narrative he goes farther: "More, wether, louly is me my gyfte, / To do with myn quatso me lykez" (565-66). The emphasis here is on the fact that the master is able to do with his rewards whatever he sees fit. Indeed, his willingness to reward even the lowliest actually makes the gift more "louly." The additions to Christ's closing augment this lesson:

Thus more men her part ay pketh
Thas thay come late and lyttel wore,
And thaȝ her sweng with little atslykez
The merci of God is much the more (571-76)

Again, God's mercy is magnified by the freedom of his giving, and the expected reaction to God's mercy is acceptance of the gift without jealousy of what has been given to others. Such a conclusion affirms that eternal gifts are God's to give and that the system can only work when people accept their rewards without jealousy for what others have received, just as the Pearl maiden asserts in her image of the heavenly community unified within Christ's body.

The narrator is, of course, outraged by the parable, condemning it as being "unreasonable" (590). Once again the spiritual lessons of the maiden overwhelm his earthly modes of understanding, just as his visions of the garden surrounding paradise had limited his ability to describe them. His argument echoes theologians such as Aquinas who believed that the richness of heavenly rewards related to earthly deeds: "In Sauter is sayd a verce ouerte, / That spekeþ a point determinable. / Thou quyteþ vch on as hys desserte" (593-95). This response reveals that he misses the maiden's point. She stresses that the workers in the parable, like all of those in heaven, receive their "desserte" and explains that "lys no joparde, / For ther is vch mon payed inlyche" (603-4). She argues that since all but those who die soon after baptism are sinners, no one really deserves their reward anyway and that "the grace of God is gret innogh" (660). In this way, the maiden reverses the narrator's original assumption that a longer life provides more opportunity to perform good works meriting heavenly reward; instead she argues that the longer one lives, the more one sins. She thus brings her lesson to a conclusion by demonstrating that the innocent are those who die before having sinned

and they merit salvation by grace alone. The only answer that she has to the narrator's perceived disparities in heavenly rewards is that they are due to the munificence of God. It is ultimately God who decides the order of the heavenly hierarchy, and the rewards are his to do with as he will. Just as the first workers in the vineyard had to work harder for the same wage so to do some Christians work harder for their heavenly rewards. However, as Wimbeldon's sermon illustrates, though the work is different, it is all equally important and equally rewarded. The key to the heavenly system is that each person recognizes God's grace and is grateful for the gift. The narrator's repeated inability to understand these truths reveals humanity's failure in achieving a perfect society. Humankind's inability to accept their place within the social order without jealousy dooms earthly systems to disorder and strife.

After the parable, the maiden's discourse focuses on the text's primary concerns, which are decidedly theological in nature: purity, worldliness, and the sacraments. During the midst of this discussion, the narrator makes a request, asking to see the heavenly city. The maiden agrees and leads him up a hill, allowing him to look down and see the celestial city. The image of the city is a powerful one. As we have seen texts often represent spiritual ideals spatially. Within the context of the narrative, the image of the city connects to the earlier arguments that the maiden makes. Even as the narrator makes clear that the sights that he sees are the same as those revealed in *The Revelations of Saint John*,⁵⁴ the poem connects the space to the larger issue of rank and reward. As he begins the vision, the poet stresses the order and grandeur of what he sees. The first detail that

⁵⁴ He notes repeatedly that his experience was just "as John deuyed" (1021).

catches his eye is the rows and rows of precious gemstones that make up the foundations of the city's structures. He notes that each tier is constructed in the same way and that each is equal in measurement. Another image that stresses the order of the space is its gates. Each of its gates is set an equal distance apart and each leads into the same promenade. Another trait of the city on which the narrator focuses is its permanence. Contrasting the eternal light of God with the impermanent light of the moon, the narrator exclaims, "The mone may therof acroche no myghte /To spotty ho is, of body to grym, / And also ther ne is neuer nyght" (1070-73). This is a permanent light, which in every way surpasses the transient light of the sun and moon. In addition, the landscape is eternally renewed by "tres ful schym / That twelue frytez of lyf con bere ful sone / Twelue sythez on ther thay beren ful frym / And renowlez nwe in vche a mone" (1076-80). Again, these trees are superior to their earthly counterpart, which produce fruit for only a short period of time. In addition to order and permanence of the heavenly space, the narrator is stunned by its grandeur. While the spaces within the city are earthly in design, their heavenly counterparts are in every way more perfect and impressive:

The stretez of golde as glasse al bare,
 The wal of jasper that glent as glayre
 The wones withinne enurned ware
 Wyth alle kynnez parre that most repayre. (1025-28)

Just as the celestial garden in which he awoke surpassed his earthly garden in every way so too does the heavenly city serve as a perfect example of the earthly city.

Having established the perfection of the heavenly space, the poem turns to the inhabitants of the celestial city. As he admires the celestial landscape, a procession of

heavenly maidens comes into view, marching along the golden streets of the city. The dreamer is moved by this spectacle: "Hundreth thowasandez I wot there were, / And alle in sute her liurez wasse. / Tor to know the gladdest chere" (1107-9). As he is brought face to face with the inhabitants of heaven, his objections to the ordering of that society are silenced. In the crowd, he sees them as equals. It is impossible for him to discern which of them "knew the gladdest chere." As the scene continues, all the inhabitants of heaven, from "aldermen" to "aungelez" join together as one body in the worship of the Lamb of Heaven. In this scene, we see the society envisioned by the hierarchical theologians. While the maiden's previous lessons revealed that there are divisions in heaven, this scene shows each member of the heavenly body uniting without care for such divisions. Each member of the heavenly congregation has received an equal reward and because of this the narrator is unable to discern any difference in their rank. In the same way that the narrator's description of the heavenly landscape shows the perfection of an earthly mode of living, the gathering of heavenly society in this scene illustrates the perfection of earthly society. It illustrates the city that Augustine imagined, a city in which people are separated by "degrees" but in which the lack of sin prevents envy and greed from disrupting the order of society.

In relation to the grandeur of the heavenly vision, the poem's conclusion is somewhat anticlimactic. Overcome by what he has witnessed, the narrator attempts to join the congregation by crossing the river. This is a rash deed, and one that reveals that he is still a slave to earthly ways of thinking. Certainly, earthly modes of life have no place within the heavenly city, and in attempting to seize that which only God can grant,

he awakes from his vision. However, the experience was not wasted on the dreamer, and upon awakening, he finally seems to comprehend the maiden's lessons. Distraught, he condemns his own actions, saying:

To that Pryncez paye hade I ay bente,
And yerned no more then watz me geuen,
And halden me ther in trwe entent,
As the perle me prayed that watz so thryuen,
As helde, drawen to Goddez present,
To mo of His mysterys I had ben dryuen. (1189-94)

He has finally learned is to know his place. He laments that if only he had submitted to the Lord's pleasure and been content with what he was being shown (as the Pearl had begged him) he might not have lost his chance at greater gifts. This is important knowledge and shows that the narrator has at last achieved some degree of enlightenment. He has finally broken free of earthly modes of conduct and has learned to accept his lot, just as each member of the heavenly community accepts the reward that God offers.

Certainly, the *Pearl* is a work very much concerned with binary oppositions: equality versus hierarchy, grace versus works. Through the maiden's discourse on equality and grace and the representation of the ordered ranks of the heavenly city, the poet reconciles these oppositions. By emphasizing the logical narrator's inability to understand the arguments of his heavenly guide, the poet makes a strong case for humankind's inability to understand the workings of God, his grace, and the society of heaven. In the end, the heavenly spaces that the narrator presents reflect the order and

harmony of God's kingdom, and the final version of the heavenly city completes the utopian vision. By emphasizing the grandeur of the heavenly landscapes, the text asserts the value of spiritual systems of understanding above earthly ones, and by asserting the order of the celestial city, an order that springs through its inhabitants' ability to accept their positions within the system without jealousy, it affirms the strict social hierarchy inherent within medieval society and serves as a possible model for peace and order within earthly social systems.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In examining the narrative function of paradise in the Middle Ages, one fundamental question is whether the image carries with it any inherent significance. In noting the various ways that the three preceding texts imagined this iconic image, we must ask whether the inclusion of an icon of such cultural importance always has a profound effect on readers' interpretations of texts. I hope that I have proven that it does. The expected audience for each of these three texts was Christian, and each deals with Christian themes. The idea of paradise is an integral element of the faith, and the popularity and variety of texts dealing with the otherworld is evidence of the hold it had upon the medieval imagination. Because this image is bound with such cultural weight, readers cannot help but carry their understanding of what heaven means to the text. Beyond this, paradise is in many ways a representation of a set of ideals. Whether it is represented as a pristine wilderness, a perfect cityscape, or a union with the divine, paradise by its very definition represents humanity's attempt to define perfection. Because that which exists in heaven is by definition perfect itself, it often serves as a tool for critiquing or affirming cultural values and social practices. This then is the power of the image. After exploring these three texts, I believe that paradise plays an important narrative role in each. Because the perfection of paradise is nearly universally accepted, the texts make use of the image's innate social context. By making paradise the locus of

action within their texts, these authors are able to justify specific ways of seeing and understanding the world, ultimately promoting certain religious, political, or social ideals.

Perhaps *Pearl* illustrates this idea most clearly. At its most literal level, *Pearl* is a poem about humanity's reaction to grief, and within cultures that believe in a paradisaical afterlife, a common technique to comfort the grief-stricken is to remind them that better things await. This poem details the story of a man who has been given the opportunity to visit the otherworld, to journey into the undiscovered country, and to learn about the afterlife. In creating this tale, the poet divides the visionary landscape into three distinct zones. From the narrator's position within the intermediate space, he encounters an amalgam of the terrestrial paradise and the celestial city, a fusion of three long standing images. This distinction between terrestrial and celestial, along with the detailed description of the temporal earth, suggests the contrast between earthly and heavenly ways of thinking that the narrator is faced with in the poem. Though the theological arguments develop dialectically as the narrator engages in debate with his heavenly guide, it is the otherworldly landscape itself that finally reveals the truth of the matter. Just as earth is a pale reflection of paradise so too are earthly ways of thinking and living corruptions of heavenly ideals. The closing vision of the heavenly city drives this point home. The poet focuses on the order of the city and in doing so stresses its perfection. Ultimately, this image mirrors the perfect order and unity of the heavenly community that follows it. In this moment, the text asserts its ideal society and affirms the maiden's arguments about hierarchy and rank. In doing so, it validates not only a social system that

had by this time found itself under attack from certain quarters but also the spiritual truth that God's grace is enough.

A similar dynamic is found in Mechtild of Hackeborn's *Booke of Ghostly Grace*. Although she imagines paradise differently than the author of *Pearl*, the image once again plays an important narrative function within the text. Mechtild's narrator longs for a union with Christ. Although her visions carry her into an otherworld where she experiences the unity of the heavenly community first hand, most often her encounters with God are individual and private. She longs for, and eventually realizes, an almost total surrender of her own identity into oneness with Christ. However, these encounters are not one-sided, for Christ also desires unity with her. At the moment of union, the body of her savior becomes a landscape, a physical paradise for her to inhabit. In this way, the image of the divine union between the soul and its savior echoes the theology expressed within the text. Mechtild advocates a personal religion, an individual experience between Christ and his worshippers. Certainly, the idea that any individual, regardless of station or gender, could come, unaided into a direct personal relationship with God was not universally accepted. Indeed, at certain times and places, this could be a somewhat dangerous idea. However, Mechtild's focus on imagery of transformation, and through these images, the divine union, asserts the validity of a religion based on an intimate relationship to God.

Likewise, paradise plays a central role in the narrative of *Saint Brendan's Journey*. The variations in the stories of Brendan's voyage into the ocean provides the opportunity to explore the ways in which seemingly minor changes to the form and

function of the image can have massive ramifications on readers' understandings of a text. Most readers accept that the *Navigatio* affirms the monastic lifestyle and its ideals, and as it moves to a close, its vision of paradise focuses primarily on its boundaries, the separation between the perfection of God's sacred spaces and the world that surrounds it. However, the *South English Legendary* focuses much more on Brendan's travels, which are in essence part of a pilgrimage to paradise. In this scheme, the Blessed Isle of the Saints serves as his ultimate destination, the focal point of his pilgrimage. Because of this, the text concerns itself with issues of the journey: how Brendan and his crew react to the dangers of the adventure, how God protects them throughout their voyage, and how the group gains spiritual knowledge and rewards through its experiences. This focus seems to demand that the narrative engage in a far more detailed description of the physical space of the island. In doing so, the text focuses its readers' attentions on the transformation of Brendan's character, which was gained through the pilgrimage experience. The perfection of paradise, therefore, extends to social practice of pilgrimage, which by the fourteenth century was under attack. Once again, the image becomes a vehicle to promote a specific set of social ideals as it validates the importance of certain cultural practices.

Ultimately, I believe that representations of paradise represent an individual's, and potentially a culture's, idea of perfection. By its very nature, it is infused with certain social significance and provides an image of what the world should, and perhaps could, ultimately become. I hope that this dissertation has made its case that representations of paradise carry with them a great deal of significance, a significance which is ultimately

transferred to the narratives that make use of them. Building upon Lefebvre's assertion that "space is a social product," I believe that the image of paradise as place is, at least within these three medieval texts, a privileged space and that it provides an avenue for readers to understand the conventions that these works of literature affirm or critique.

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